

20th ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

cineACTION

ISSUE 67 2005



FILM ON FILM

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FILM ON FILM

agenda at the height of its academic entrenchment. We miss him as a friend and colleague.

The theme of this issue, *Film on Film*, is intended as our celebration of film culture. It was conceived in response to the notion that the demise of the cinema as an art form occurred at the end of the 20th Century. We think the present day cinema reflects its complex history, keeping the medium vital and relevant. Contemporary filmmakers around the world reference and pay tribute to major influences that have inspired their work. The French New Wave's influence on the work of Wong Kar-Wai, Hou Hsiao-hsien, Tsai Ming-liang, Jia Zhang-ke, Abbas Kiarostami, Jafar Panahi, Claire Denis, Michael Haneke, Jim Jarmusch and Martin Scorsese, both in terms of visual style and thematic concerns, is an illustration of how the cinema continues to develop as an art form and remain central to dramatizing the social and political concerns of modern life.

CineAction was founded to provide criticism that would address social, cultural and aesthetic concerns as they appear in a broad range of filmmaking modes, past and present. We hope to continue to meet our original intentions.

We thank the magazine's designers, formally Stuart Ross, Kevin Connolly and Julie Jenkinson, currently Bob Wilcox, for their consistently high quality work and also the Canada Council for its on-going support. Finally, we thank our readers, both longstanding and new, without whom we would not exist.

Florence Jacobowitz & Richard Lippe
Editors of this issue and *CineAction's* first issue
in Spring 1985.

CineAction is pleased to be celebrating its twentieth anniversary; having survived as a small journal for this many years is an accomplishment in itself. To acknowledge the occasion the editors have each written a short article on a film they value. Although not all of the past editorial members are represented, we are pleased to be including contributions from several of the founding editors. We also wish to express our sense of loss since Andrew Britton died in 1994. Andrew was a major contributor for a number of years and his intelligence, original thinking and insights gave the magazine some of its finest theoretical and critical writings. For example, Andrew's article "The Myth of postmodernism: The Bourgeois Intelligentsia in the Age of Reagan" (Issue 13/14, Summer '88) courageously exposed the fallacies of the postmodernist

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CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

ISSUE 68 NATURAL BORN KILLERS

The theme for this issue is *Natural Born Killers*. The issue's scope is broad, and intended to cover not just the obvious, in homage to Oliver Stone's film, a focus on the American obsession with violence and death as evidenced by American cinema both mainstream and independent, past and present; but also possible explorations of the impact of the democratization of imagemaking, where the proliferation and popularization of digital cameras, both still and video, have enabled everyone to both frame and expose their own manufactured horrors, from the US soldiers at Abu Ghraib to Iraqi terrorist executions, both available on the internet for downloading in the privacy of your own home. In extension, *Natural Born Killers* also refers beyond America's borders, as other national cinemas (Korea and Japan, to name two), have also produced an inordinate number of films about death and horror.

Edited by Susan Morrison smorr@the-wire.com

Please email the editor a brief proposal and declaration of interest.

Submissions in the form of a hard copy mailed to the editor by **SEPT. 1, 2005**.

CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

ISSUE 69 NEW CINEMA OF AFRICA, ASIA AND LATIN AMERICA

This issue will include broad coverage of new films from the three continents; submissions may focus on aesthetics and genres, politics, new film movements, relationship to global cinema, the legacy of colonialism and the impact of imperialist globalization.

The issue will also welcome submissions of under 500 words, for a section presenting brief discussions of new Canadian films.

Edited by Scott Forsyth sforsyth@yorku.ca

Please email any questions or interest to the editor. Submissions in hard copy mailed to the editor at the magazine's mailing address by **JANUARY 30, 2006**.

editors' choices

CineAction editors, past and present, have each written a short article on a film they value

REMEMBERING *MEMORIES OF UNDERDEVELOPMENT*

BY SCOTT FORSYTH

In the conclusion of Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's great *Memories of Underdevelopment/Memorias del Subdesarrollo* (1968) the film leaves behind its disagreeable protagonist, Sergio, and his inventive, and unreliable, first-person fiction and takes up the omniscient, and collective, perspective of newsreel documentary—watching Fidel's defiance of American threats and Havana's preparations for an invasion in the midst of the so-called Missile Crisis. Individual and collective fates are dialectically tangled and open-ended. Sergio's voice-over ended with his typically self-centred, whining, relationship to the revolution: "And if it started right now? It's no use protesting, I'll die like the rest. This island is a trap. We're very small,

and too poor. It's an expensive dignity." Fidel's speech immediately clarifies the theme of national dignity as collective response, illustrating the revolutionary commitment from which Sergio remains alienated. But the last moments of the film are far from triumphal; we watch, and silently wait, with the Cubans. The film, and its haunting, hanging denouement, has remained compelling to me for more than twenty years—as the Cuban revolution endures defiantly, still transforming and threatened—along with the lasting importance of its aesthetic and political themes.

Memories has been rightly celebrated by many film historians and critics. Michael Chanan, the major historian of Cuban film, calls it "...an exercise in the

Memories of Underdevelopment

fragmentation and dissociation of imagery and representation." Indeed, the film is among the most powerful of the wave of fiction films all over the world from the fifties onwards that complicate and interrogate cinematic form and narrative. Multiple viewings have not exhausted the film's intricate self-referential dissection of itself, and film's 'ways of seeing', while we are watching. Alea is certainly aware of Antonioni, Godard and developments in metropolitan cinema, but the film must be seen as central to the indigenous development in Cuba of a socialist cinema that entwined modernism and realism, inspired by earlier avant-gardes while remaining distant from Soviet orthodoxies. It also richly illustrates the momentous development of revolutionary culture in the so-called third world, in particular the Third Cinema that hoped to combine filmmaking, political activism and a sophisticated intellectual comprehension of both imperialist culture and the possibilities of revolutionary transformations. For a Marxist teacher of film studies, it is use-value that often defines a good revolutionary film and *Memories* has worked wonderfully in so many courses over the years—introductions to film history and film theory, third world cinema, seminars in contemporary film theory or Marxist cultural theory. For many students, the film's elaborate portrayal of its anti-hero protagonist is particularly challenging. Sergio, the bourgeois repelled by his own class, aimlessly claiming to be an artist and unable to understand, or reject, the revolution, draws their identification. By the conclusion, that spectatorial identification has come through a sharp, sometimes humorous, critique of individuality—Sergio's vapid alienation, his oppressive masculinity, his metropolitan disdain for the 'underdeveloped'—to a complex appreciation of the collective's uncertain, 'underdeveloped' transformation. The film is a realization of Alea's inspiring aesthetic and pedagogical discussion of 'The Dialectic of the Spectator' but it is also a frank examination of the uneasy relationship of artists and intellectuals to the momentous difficulties of revolution.



Marking twenty years of *CineAction* is probably a surprise for most of us. We imagined combining our ambitions in film criticism, our radical political commitments and our vocations as teachers. From a variety of perspectives, we also wanted to intervene in the developing field—or quasi-discipline—of film studies—particularly against the then cementing orthodoxy, a theoretical melange of psychoanalysis, structuralism and post variations. Of course, film studies has changed over those years, even if it still awkwardly aspires to the institutional respectability of a discipline, and, if that orthodoxy has waned, much film theory remains as apolitical and obscurantist as we polemically proclaimed. But we also seem to have created a small institution ourselves, along with our many contributors and readers from all over the world. For me, Alea's film—with its rewardingly intricate aesthetic, its theoretical complexity and radical pedagogy, its challenge to artists and intellectuals and its commitment to revolution—is a useful reminder of the motivations and challenges for a radical cultural politics.

ZÉRO DE CONDUITE Radical Cinema

BY FLORENCE JACOBOWITZ

CineAction was created to publish criticism that would address the political potential inherent in cinematic practice, particularly popular cinema. Vigo, Vertov, Bunuel and others understood this idea; they were actively involved in film culture and produced works that embraced social change. I chose to write about *Zéro de Conduite*, a film about revolution, without realizing I would be celebrating Vigo's centenary at the same time—a coincidence a surrealist would value. Vigo isn't categorized a surrealist as, for example, Bunuel is, but his films were clearly influenced by the movement and its precepts. In many ways Vigo's seamless blending of Realism with an expressive interpretation of reality and magic to produce a poetic, ethereal form of cinema—a surrealism—was precisely what many of the surrealist artists attempted. *Zéro de Conduite* is both a politicized work about oppression and liberation and a personal film that uses memory as a means to unearth a state of being. Its

ellipses, condensed structure, not perfectly coherent moments are attributable to the imperfect print that survives, budget restraints, limited studio time at Gaumont, non-professional young actors, Vigo's struggles with illness during filming, but they also reflect the vagaries of a memory piece, drawn from adolescence, imperfectly remembered in detail but perfectly recalled in terms of experience—what it feels like to be forced into a mould of behaviour that is unnatural and oppressive by way of reprimands, punishment, disempowerment. The film's very authentic representation of adolescence—that bridge between childhood and adult life that is a volatile period where one is finding one's identity, body and a personal voice—services a broader statement about social conformity and freedom. Ultimately, Vigo's commitment to rejecting what is considered successful socialization and his celebration of the energy sublimated and suppressed along the way forms the heart of the film. In this sense Vigo's film departs radically from other films of the period that use the setting of the same sex boarding school in a similar way, to make a statement about the conflicts between nature, instinct and containment, like Sternberg's *The Blue Angel* and Sagan's *Mädchen in Uniform*. Vigo's film ventures furthest in its support of the overthrow of the dominant ideology represented in the school system and in its spirit of possibility.

I have always loved *Zéro de Conduite*'s

gang of four 'delinquents', Caussat/Louis Lefebvre (who reappears as Père Jules's cabin boy in *L'Atalante*), Colin/ Gilbert Pruchon, Brûlé/ Coco Goldstein and the late joiner and ultimate revolutionary Tabard/Gérard de Bédarieux, before watching two boys grow into adolescence, but having done so only intensifies my awe of the details that are so characteristic of the age being portrayed. The film's opening sequence, the return to school that marks the end of a child's freedom during vacation time, initiates the viewer into the boys' frame of mind and introduces the central protagonists. Caussat is seated in the car of a train opposite a man who is asleep. (He is Huguet/Jean Dasté the new teacher.) Caussat is bored and he gets up, peers outside the window into the smoky air outside and pulls in, as if conjuring, his friend Brûlé. They proceed to entertain and impress each other with their newly learnt tricks which involve magic (a finger is removed and replaced), play (a toy that shoots a pop-up ball), creativity (a horn that can be played by mouth or nostril), transgression (balloons become breasts that can be touched), otherness (feathers used to impersonate an American Indian). Each show appreciation for the other's demonstration before sitting back to relax by lighting up cigars and suffusing the interior of the car with smoke. The train grinds to a halt at the station. Huguet slides out of his seat and the boys cry out, "He's dead, let's beat



Zéro de Conduite: Huguet's classroom



it", as they rush out of the car, meet their friend Colin and try to convince him of the corpse on the train. This opening sequence establishes a tone and mood that characterizes adolescence; the score largely supplants dialogue, heightening the sense of fun, vitality and disregard for decorum, which the school will work to eradicate or repress. Caussat is immediately greeted by the school's representative /Robert Le Flon (who is called Pète-Sec or 'dry-fart') with the reminder that vacation is over. Towards the end of the sequence Tabard is introduced when his mother approaches Pète-Sec on the platform and informs him, "Rene Tabard will report to school tomorrow as he has a broken heart tonight." The explanation follows the surreal logic of memory or dreams where moments assume special significance that are not entirely rational, but it also introduces an important theme in the film—the perception of Tabard's sensitivity/effeminacy which threatens the status quo.

Bréau, Caussat and Colin are the school scapegoats who bear the brunt of punishment for infractions, real or imagined, for the greater group. It is never evident in the film that their behaviour is particularly different or in any way worse than the others; in fact, in the first scene in the dormitory the teacher calls to reprimand Dupont and Bréau, Caussat and Colin automatically appear, conditioned

as they are for punishment. They earn endless zeros for conduct, realized through Sunday detentions (the loss of their one day of freedom), which accumulates to the point where they decide to revolt. Tabard convinces the three, through his friendship with Bréau, to allow him to join in their plans (the 'complot'). Tabard is singled out as the embodiment of the school's homophobic fears; his friendship with Bréau is surveyed and monitored as a potential problem. The principal/Delphin calls Tabard in as a warning "I'm like your father. Bréau is older than you...your personality, your sensitive nature, neurosis, psychosis, anything can happen!" which rationalizes the school's policy of surveillance .At the same time the chemistry teacher's attentions and attraction to Tabard as an object of desire, expressed in a close-up shot of his hands resting on Tabard's, elicits Tabard's response "Je vous dits merde", the cri-de-coeur which instigates the revolt. Tabard's refusal to retract his statement is logical. Like most adolescents, he is intolerant of adult hypocrisy; the film places the administration's projected fears of Tabard's sexuality within the context of warped, repressed desire. This is precisely the theme of *The Blue Angel*; the Professor and his authority collapse when his hypocrisy is exposed to his students, and the concept of morality he represents ceases to bear meaning.

Zéro de Conduite illustrates how pervasive this double standard is .The principles underpinning the system are defined by self-interest and self-preservation. During recess, the Surveillant-Général/du Verron (called Bec-de-Gaz or Gas-Snout) steals the students' snacks, rifles through their possessions and spies on them, eager to report transgressions. The principal's prime concern is that alumni day, when the school presents itself to the public, is without 'histoires', and he specifies, no Caussat, Druel, and Colin etc. The goal is a rigid conformity devoid of difference, visualized in the lined up beds, the blind man patrolling the dorm, opening and shutting lights. What distinguishes *Zéro de Conduite* is Vigo's optimism and affirmation of humanity, and the idea that one can always make the best of a bad situation. The dormitory may be a place of confinement but it is also a place where the boys can marvel at and respect the gravity of a sleepwalker ("Shut up or you'll kill him!") or where the first stage of the rebellion explodes and is inaugurated. To Vigo's credit the lines are not drawn by adults (staff) versus children (students), but by values-conformity versus instinct and creativity. Huguet is used to highlight this idea; he is introduced asleep in the train car with the boys (his feet remain in the right corner of the frame during their entire exchange), in their world, and he is linked to the adolescent sense of wonder and anarchic impulse. He shares and understands their need for spontaneous expression, the physical world and play, and his impersonation of Charlie Chaplin in the schoolyard suggests that art fulfills these needs in the broader social world. In the film's characteristically concise manner, this concept is dramatized in the scene in Huguet's classroom. After Caussat collects paste from each student to sabotage future thefts by Bec-de-Gaz, Huguet proceeds with his lesson. He helps a boy learn how to walk while performing a handstand by demonstrating the feat himself. The class approves and applauds. He continues in this upside down position and draws a figure that magically becomes animated and morphs from a drawing of a bather (which Huguet's voice in voiceover comments "See Bec-de-Gaz, how handsome he is") into one of Napoleon (a reference perhaps to the principal who keeps his hat under a glass/cover, as Napoleon's was kept, on the mantelpiece in his office). Pète-Sec enters the room (one imagines because of the noise) and the

camera surveys the chaotic scene: one boy smokes, another balances himself on a desk and the camera pans back to Huguet whose response is a smile and a shrug of the shoulders. Huguet understands his students and has no desire to control or change them. During the rooftop assault on alumni day he tips his hat to them, in support of their accomplishment.

The class outing is another elaboration of this theme, and the difference between Huguet's pedagogic methodology and the traditional approach is demonstrated through parallel editing. The sequence intercuts the excursion with a scene in the principal's office where certain pressing concerns are being discussed. The scene opens with Bec-de-Gaz organizing the boys before their departure, moving Tabard away from Bruel. There is a wonderful moment where the principal and the assistant enter the office and after the principal struggles to place his hat on the mantelpiece that is out of his reach, he glances in the mirror above and magically sees the reflection of his assistant mirroring his gestures back to him, as if reassuring him of the height and dictatorial grandeur he wishes to convey. The scene is intercut with Huguet's class outing which is diametrically opposite from the scene in the school office. Huguet is uninterested in leading and is wandering at whim, unaware if anyone is following. Like the children he is driven by impulse and spontaneity and walks off alone; he enters a smoke shop, admires and then chases a woman down a street (the boys running to keep up, falling and spilling onto the road) whose skirt transforms, in a cut on movement, into another 'frock'- a priest who is annoyed and walks briskly away. The principal meanwhile discusses alumni day, Colin and Caussat's immaturity which justifies the need for increased supervision, the suspicions regarding Huguet's performance in the classroom and the school's 'moral responsibility', alluding to Tabard's relationship with Bruel. The sequence ends with the principal and assistant awaiting the class's return to school in the dark, in the rain. Huguet enters through the gate alone ("Is M. Huguet alone? ...and the outing? This is intolerable!") and the boys struggle in behind; the principal notes Tabard and Bruel's arrival and comments, "Look, they're together again! This friendship is becoming excessive! You're right we must keep an eye on them!"

The scenes directly associated with the boy's energy and creative expression—the

opening on the train or the procession in the dormitory that announces the rebellion—are the most surreal in terms of tone and ethos. The initiation of the rebellion is one of the most extraordinary sequences in the history of the cinema—it is prefaced with the reading of the manifesto: "It's war! Down with school! Down with teachers! Down with punishment! Arise with us! Liberty or death! Vivre la révolte!" The combination of the boys' ecstatic happiness as they march in their procession, Caussat seated in a chair carried along as his night shirt flies up exposing his naked body, the mise-en-scène suffused with feathers flying, all in slow motion to the accompaniment of Jaubert's marvelous score (recorded backwards with the sound loop reversed during the sound-mixing)¹ creates a surreal reality, a blending of fantasy and reality that is breathtaking. A smaller moment that has a similar effect, is Caussat's Sunday outing which is expressed all in one shot: an adult is sitting reading a newspaper off to the side, Caussat is blindfolded and a young girl is busy stringing a goldfish in a bowl suspended across a wire. These scenes most directly express a state of mind or have the feel of a dream or memory, and invite the viewer to share in the sensibility being dramatized. Otherwise the film maintains a more objective, detached point of view that comments and presents its themes as opposed to encouraging any particular position. This commentary often reflects Vigo's wry sense of humour and understanding of adolescent humour, like the principal who is small and child-sized, or the boys in the schoolyard who smoke in the toilet stalls or open the stall door suddenly to reveal another boy with his pants down, or Colin asking Caussat if he will be going to see "Poupoule" (little chicken) on Sunday, to which Caussat responds by laughing uproariously. The dramatization of alumni day is almost Brechtian in its use of stuffed dummies who form the back row of school and municipal officials (literalizing the stuffed shirts condemned in the manifesto) and at the same time surreal in its inclusion of firemen and various gymnasts. Another remarkable example of Vigo's use of style as commentary occurs in the scene in the science class, when the principal announces that the science teacher has generously decided not to insist on Tabard's suspension from school following his outburst. Instead of cutting back and forth between the principal who is insisting on a public apology and Tabard

who refuses to offer one, the camera is kept at a distance from the characters that are kept equidistant from the camera along a horizontal line. At the extreme left is Huguet, followed by the science teacher, the principal, Tabard and to the extreme right is Caussat at his desk. The camera, centred on the principal and Tabard, pans laterally across the room as the principal speaks, providing a visual commentary to what is being said. When he informs Tabard that the disciplinary committee has agreed to accept his apology provided it is repeated publicly "under the pressure of your kindly teacher, you are magnanimous M. Biot", the camera pans left to the chemistry teacher who raises one hand modestly, in acknowledgement. The camera proceeds through the principal's speech to pan right, across the room, taking in the other students and rests on Caussat, conspicuously trying to be inconspicuous by writing furiously. It then pans left across the room to the opposite end of the spectrum, past the other teachers to rest on Huguet who, upon hearing that a private apology will not suffice and a public one is being demanded, looks concerned and rises to move closer to Tabard and the principal. The camera pans back to Tabard as the principal awaits his response and only then is there a cut to a more traditional over-the-shoulder shot from behind the principal, facing Tabard, to register his response, "Je vous dits merde." The subtlety of these lateral pans and the ironic commentary they provide has to be seen to be appreciated, but it is in line with much of the film, which is often shot from a distance, from extreme high angles, or medium to long shots, or in the use of drum rolls, which allow for a perspective that is detached and comments on the narrative as it presents its argument for the necessity of a revolution within the social system. At the same time Vigo's film includes magical scenes that, like Huguet, defy the 'rational' world and reflect an insider's complete understanding of the nature of adolescence: the mixture of heightened sensitivity, the broad humour, the defense of other misfits and nonconformists, the need for physical expression, for noise, for play. Its poetry is manifest in its respect for surprise and difference, and it remains as fresh and relevant today as it was in 1933.

NOTES

1 Salles Gomes P.E., *Jean Vigo*. (Secker and Warburg, London: 1972 pg 125)

THE LIFE OF DEATH IN *DEATHWATCH* AND DYING AT *GRACE*

BY MAUREEN JUDGE

Bertrand Tavernier's *Deathwatch* (1980) foreshadows the advent of reality television and pre-dates several other excellent dramatic films which play on and critique the genre, such as *The Truman Show* (1998), *Pleasantville* (1998) and *Nurse Betty* (2000). I've decided to revisit *Deathwatch*, which I wrote about twenty years ago in the first issue of *CineAction*, from my vantage point of a vérité documentary filmmaker.

Deathwatch remains an exciting, prescient and radically relevant moral critique on contemporary society—and in this instance, contemporary reality television. When I recently watched Allan King's new documentary film *Dying at Grace*, I began thinking about *Deathwatch* and what the two films had in common beyond the obvious and overriding narrative themes of death and dying.

Dying at Grace chronicles the final days of Joyce, Carmella, Eda, Richard and Lloyd, all of whom are terminally ill. In *Deathwatch*, the film takes a critical look at the making of a fictional soap opera, a quasi-documentary, reality genre program, which observes the final days of a young woman Katherine Mortenhoe/Romy Schneider.

Tavernier's choice of filming a narrative around a taboo subject, death and dying, foregrounds the problematic nature of how content can be exploited through its formal presentation. In the film's story, the TV soap opera is presented as the real thing. *Deathwatch* criticizes the appropriation of another's life/death for public consumption and entertainment. A billboard for the show (with the same name as the film) reads, *DEATH WATCH THE ULTIMATE ADVENTURE ...Watch this soap.*"

Dying at Grace makes no apology for the choice of subject matter. But, unlike the soap opera, where in the spirit of a travelogue, we trapse around the bewilderingly beautiful countryside with the film's dying protagonist, the documentary rarely leaves the hospital. It begins and ends with death on the screen. There is no music, no overwhelming catharsis. We witness the ending of



Deathwatch

human life in all its rawness, humility and pain, in concert with the everyday epiphanies that nourish and sustain us right up to the end.

Towards the beginning of *Deathwatch* we meet the show's videographer, Roddy/Harvey Keitel who has had cameras implanted in his eyes, so he can unobtrusively befriend and track the television show's future protagonist, Katherine Mortenhoe. The ensuing narrative focuses on Katherine's struggle to find a private space for herself, "I just want to get out of this life on my own", and Roddy's persistent camera-eye, secretly filming her every move.

In *Dying at Grace*, there is no hidden camera. The individuals observed on-screen have consented to the film process and are a cognitive part of it. What differentiates Allan King's film from the fictional television show within *Deathwatch* is the treatment of the storylines. *Dying at Grace* is a eulogy for lives lived. Tavernier's film takes a critical look at the soap-inspired television show format and the choice made to exploit the literal drama of life and death and blur the lines of sentimentality and suffering.

Dying at Grace is not sentimental. It is bold and powerful. Life and death have an equally measured impact. The individuals die slowly and perceptively, while living through every moment. It was only when the subjects died and the camera

held on the caved-in dead faces I felt uncomfortable. The deaths were almost too intimate, almost too up-close. And the shots felt interminable. But, as each of the faces remained still, my aversion was transformed into an acceptance of each death.

As a documentary filmmaker, choosing my subject matter and knowing what attitude and approach I should bring to it is difficult. It's partly intuitive, but nonetheless, making reflective choices on who to film, what to film and how to film are critical. *Deathwatch* warns us about getting the storytelling "right", (ironically, at the end of the film, Roddy is permanently blinded by his camera implants, before being able to see the light) and *Dying at Grace* gets it "right" with its honest, provocative and substantive storytelling.

Maureen Judge is the executive producer of the poetry series, *Heart of a Poet*. She recently created and directed the award winning series, *Family Secrets*. She is the producer/director of the Genie award-winning documentary *Unveiled: The Mother Daughter Relationship*, *In My Parents' Basement* and *Ahd We Knew How To Dance*. Judge has a Master's Degree in Cinema Studies from New York University and has taught at York University and Humber College. She currently lectures at Sheridan College.

IN A GLASS CAGE

BY BRUCE LABRUCE

A modern cult classic, *In a Glass Cage* (1987), directed by Spaniard Agustín Villaronga, is a variation on the themes of sadomasochism and the relationship between sex and Thanatos under fascism first explored by Liliana Cavani in the influential *The Night Porter* (1974). As in that excellent film, in which concentration camp survivor Charlotte Rampling checks into a Vienna hotel and has a torrid affair with the night porter (Dirk Bogarde), a former S.S. officer with whom she had been forced into a sadomasochistic relationship in the camps thirteen years earlier, *In a Glass Cage* concerns a Nazi who, years later, becomes involved with someone with whom he had had a bizarre sexual relationship in a concentration camp. In this instance, however, the man (Klaus/Gunter Meisner) is a pedophile and the former victim, a young boy.

The film begins with Klaus, a doctor who has been performing medical experiments on and sexually abusing children in the camps, jumping off a building in a suicide attempt, but ending up paralyzed instead. Fast-forward years later to Spain where the evil doctor, now in hiding, is confined to an iron lung under the care of his wife and daughter. A mysterious, beautiful boy (Angelo/Davis Sust) arrives and insists on becoming Klaus's nurse, revealing his true identity—as one of the boys that he had sexually molested and tortured—only to the doctor. What follows is a series of shocking scenes in which the boy gradually starts to act out the same sexual power games of torture and murder that the doctor performed in the camps. Angelo starts off innocently, merely jerking off on the doctor's face, the only part of his body that is not encased in the iron lung. But soon things become more sinister as he brings home young boys and kills them in front of Klaus, a captive audience, according to the notes that the doctor kept of the terrible experiments he conducted during the war. Much of the film is comprised of these gruesome rituals shot with very young actors, a fact that caused the work to be banned in Britain and other countries.

In a sequence reminiscent of Dario Argento, Angelo (think Tennessee Williams' *I'angelo della morte*) murders the doctor's wife, hanging her, in a horrific scene, over the balcony of the

cavernous house. The boy then dumps her body on top of the transparent iron lung, making Klaus spend the night face to face with his dead wife. Although deeply disturbing and even revolting, the movie, besides being stylistically rigorous and beautifully shot in shades of blue and grey, is a serious study of the horrors of fascism, the power relations inherent in sex, and the sexual dynamics between sexual predator and victim. Although Hollywood usually shies away from such extreme subject matter, for another take on the same theme check out the less disturbing but equally interesting *Apt Pupil* (1998), based on the Stephen King story and directed by Bryan Singer. Both films seen together underscore and update the implicit relationship between homosexuality and fascism that Visconti first posited in *The Damned* (1969).

former showgirl, whom he supports although she rejects him because he is deformed). In turn, Vicki, after witnessing Tommy getting Louis an acquittal on a murder charge by using his hip injury as a means to gain the jury's sympathy, informs him that he too in essence is practising prostitution. The accusation, instead of alienating Tommy from her, makes him realize the extent to which he has lost his self-respect. Their mutual awareness of what they have become and who they really wanted to be is the basis of the narrative's movement.

Tommy and Vicki are comparable to the Humphrey Bogart and Gloria Grahame characters in *In a Lonely Place* but, crucially, their relationship isn't endangered from within. In contrast to Bogart's unstable personality and violent behaviour, Tommy is rational and uses his intellect to protect himself. And, unlike Grahame's insecure actress, Vicki is a woman of strength and determination. In fact, it is Vicki who, in response to Tommy's character slur, initiates the series of events which enables them to break free from Rico's seemingly iron grip. It is Vicki who convinces Tommy that he can professionally begin anew—for Tommy, to reinvent his life means taking a chance on a risky operation that might repair his damaged body. Later, when Rico attempts to control Tommy, it is Vicki's refusal to be intimidated that prompts Tommy to defy Rico and testify in court against him. In *Party Girl*, violence doesn't destroy the lovers' relationship; instead, it becomes the catalyst that affirms their commitment to each other. In this sense, the film's treatment of the couple's relationship is similar to that of *Johnny Guitar*'s in which the reunion of the Joan Crawford and Sterling Hayden characters is necessary to their moral redemption and physical survival.

Despite being assigned to the project, Robert Taylor and Cyd Charisse, in presence and performance, are an asset to the film. Charisse, in addition to performing two seductive solo dance numbers (Vicki, to earn a living, works as a showgirl but she is given the opportunity to show her dance skills when Tommy tells Rico to showcase her), invests her characterization with an intelligence and awareness that make Vicki an equal of Tommy. Employing her strong sexually assertive screen presence through the dance numbers, Charisse also projects an emotional reserve that is gradually released as Vicki commits herself to the relationship. (Tommy and Vicki both are self-contained

PARTY GIRL Ray and Hollywood

BY RICHARD LIPPE

Nicholas Ray didn't initiate *Party Girl*, an MGM project conceived as a vehicle for Robert Taylor and Cyd Charisse, but it is, in characterization and thematic, one of his most personal films. Set in Prohibition era Chicago, *Party Girl* is a gangster film that is centred, uncharacteristically for the genre, on a love relationship. Tommy Farrell/Robert Taylor is a defense lawyer for mobster Rico Angelo/Lee J. Cobb while Vicki Gaye/Cyd Charisse works as a showgirl in a night club Rico controls. Tommy and Vicki meet at a party Rico gives when she, trying to shake off Louis Canetto/John Ireland who has given her his gambling winnings in return for her company, asks Tommy to take her home. When Tommy gets up to escort her out of the room, she discovers he is handicapped (a childhood accident in which his hip was smashed). Tommy has compensated for his physical deformity by becoming a powerful figure in his profession. Vicki also bears a childhood scar—as a teenager she was raped and the experience left her cynical about men who she has learned to financially exploit as a 'party girl'. Although both are attracted to one another, Tommy distances himself from Vicki, telling her that the money she has taken from Louis is the price she puts on her pride. (Tommy is married to a

people, who have a hard polished surface that covers an underlying vulnerability.) *Party Girl* also benefits from the performances of Lee J. Cobb and John Ireland, the former embodying unbridled violence while the latter projects a relentless sexual aggression towards Vicki. Both actors enhance the film's portrait of a primitive world in which survival itself is an accomplishment.

Party Girl, like Ray's other widescreen films, illustrates his confidence in handling the format. It is also characterized by his ever-present sensitivity to space and composition. With the exception of one sequence, the film was shot on studio sets and Ray takes full advantage of this controlled environment to make *Party Girl* a lush and beautifully designed

film, particularly so in his use of colour. Ray's Chicago of mobsters and speakeasies is a distinctively theatrical space in which decor and wardrobe are given an expressive function. For example, Vicki, in the 'party girl' sequence, wears a red dress. After Tommy takes her home, she invites him up to her apartment for cocoa (which is what she intends to give him although Tommy thinks it's meant as a euphemism). Vicki mentions she has a roommate (a girl from the club who is desperate because she is pregnant and her lover, a married man, has abandoned her); wanting to enter the bathroom to medicate a minor hand burn she received when taking a saucepan off the stove, Vicki, on opening the bathroom door, finds, to her shock and horror, her

roommate slumped over the water-filled tub, having slit her wrists. The bathtub is a pool of blood. The use of the colour red, which has moved from provocation (the red dress) to death, continues. Vicki, next seen in a police station, is being given a sedative after having been questioned about the suicide. Tommy takes her back to his place and, on arriving, she sits down and then collapses onto the living room couch which is coloured a dark shade of red; Vicki, in her red dress, is engulfed by the couch, echoing the red pool of blood in the bathroom shot. The series of images is audacious in its use of colour and narrative commentary, creating an effect that is as aesthetically beautiful as it is emotionally disturbing.

The connection of Vicki to the colour red is taken up again in the film's climactic sequence in which Rico threatens to punish Tommy by disfiguring Vicki's face with acid. The sequence, set in a meeting hall, which previously was the site of a brutal beating Rico inflicted on one of his men, takes place during the Christmas holiday season. The hall is decorated with coloured streamers and red tissue paper bells. To taunt Tommy, Rico pours a bit of the acid over one of the bells and then has Vicki brought into the room. Vicki, whose lower face is bandaged suggesting that she may have already been disfigured, is wearing a red dress which provides a link back to her initial meeting with Tommy and its immediate aftermath.

Ray's attentive use of colour adds to *Party Girl*'s emphasis on spectacle and performance as an integral aspect of the lives of the film's characters and does so without being self-conscious about it. There is no sense of 'artiness', an attempt to upgrade a genre film.

I was taken by *Party Girl* when I initially saw it in 1958, although at the time I didn't fully understand why the film impressed me. As a Nicholas Ray film, it is one of his most unified and coherent works and perhaps contains his most tender and elegant dramatization of his concerns about love, violence and survival. *Party Girl* also demonstrates, through directorial presence, genre and the star system, the artistry and pleasures of Hollywood's late classical cinema.

Party Girl, as a 1958 Hollywood product, is in the company of Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, Minnelli's *Gigi*, Preminger's *Bonjour Tristesse* and Sirk's *The Tarnished Angels*. Like Ray's film, all of these works are among my favorite films.



Party Girl

JIA ZHANG-KE'S THE WORLD

BY SUSAN MORRISON

As TV news reports and newspaper business sections warn of North American companies threatened by Chinese buyouts and North American workers by the thousands made unemployed by the dumping of cheap Chinese products justified by Walmart's stance that it's only doing what the average American claims is their god-given right...to buy commodities at the lowest price possible...the second coming of the 'Yellow Peril' is being trumpeted, this time with China standing in for Japan. Jia Zhang-ke's recent film, *The World* (2004), should be mandatory viewing for all who believe that a booming economy solves/salves all social problems. On the surface, Jia depicts a (quasi-feudal) China that has been thrust into the modern world of international theme parks and cell phones, of electronic music and electronic animation. The thriving metropolis provides plenty of employment opportunities for peasant villagers who arrive desperate for work, but at what cost, asks Jia in this film. Construction projects rapaciously devour the old city, eliminating all traces of the traditional, replacing them with anonymous modernist style buildings that could be found anywhere. *The World* is set in an actual theme park in Beijing (called World Park), a tourist attraction for the Chinese themselves. Here is a place that promises a whirlwind tour (a full circuit in 15 minutes) of the famous sites and sights of the rest of the world without ever having to leave home. As one of the characters proudly says, pointing to replicas of the Twin Trade Towers in a scaled down version of lower Manhattan, "Their's are gone, but we still have our's!" Not only does the Chinese visitor experience the wonders of the world, both ancient and modern, in miniature, but the spectacular Las Vegas style stage shows that are presented daily offer further homogenization of world cultures by being themed into national (and historical) displays of costume. Young Chinese women dressed as ancient Egyptians, traditional Thais, Indians, Koreans etc. all perform the same style of contemporary 'pop' choreography accompanied by the same style of pop electronic music, with no attempt being given to matching costume with the music and dance traditions



The World

of the countries represented.

Tao, the film's lead female character, is one of these performers. Our introduction to her (and to the film) is of her moving through a crowded corridor coming toward us dressed as a traditional Indian woman in sari and nose ring (eye glitter additional), calling out repetitively in a kind of grating voice for a band aid. Tao's life on the job is one of glamorous costume, elaborate makeup and a swirl of activity in fabulous settings from the 'Eiffel Tower' to the cockpit of a (grounded) jet plane and the brightly-lighted stage. Off the job, she dresses plainly in nondescript sweater and pants, little makeup and inhabits crumbling flats and tawdry rented spaces. Jia further heightens this stark contrast between the fantasy world of the theme park in its glistening modernity and the dull and painful reality of young people's daily lives in his shooting style, which alternates between fast-paced cross-cut spectacle and long shots with limited action and little camera movement of individuals trying to communicate with each other.

Picking up on this static/dynamic opposition are two major motifs which are repeated throughout *The World*: passports and cellphones. What connects these two, of course, is the (potential) mobility they provide the holder. A passport enables Tao's former boyfriend to escape to Mongolia to look for a fresh start. On the other hand, when Anna, a Russian dancer who befriends Tao, is forced to give up her passport to her slimy Russian manager, we know that a

miserable fate awaits her. A secondary theme related to passports is airplanes, coded in this film as agents of flight (pun intended). Tao's lament that she has never been on a plane, nor does she have a passport implies an unhappiness with her present way of life. When near the end of the film, we see a shot of Anna in a plane headed to Ulan Bator, we can only assume that this is a Sirkian aporia; i.e. we'd certainly like this to happen but the circumstances under which we last saw her...an apparent prostitute and passportless... mitigate against a happy ending. As for cellphones, they serve a number of functions. In addition to the usual voice communication, they provide an alternate means of communication through text messaging to people who don't seem to be able to speak directly to each other. Niu and Wei, two other performers in the theme park, have a running dual throughout the film as he uses a cell phone to try to keep track of her whereabouts and (questionable) fidelity. The cellphone is also the vehicle for an astonishing use of animated inserts that begin on the tiny cellphone screen but then expand to fill the entire film frame. While each of these simple animations derives from the previous moment whether a specific text message or a related event, it is relevant to note that all of them are fantasy sequences involving emancipatory movement of some kind, whether it's Tao in stewardess uniform flying over the theme park and city of Beijing, Taisheng on horseback riding to visit a lover with flower petals floating

all around him in a fairytale-like effect or the depiction of a giant carp swimming freely through the waters.

The big city, with its promise of a better life, is a trap for most of the characters in the film who have flocked to it like moths to a flame. Rather than being freed by a decent job, the reality of the world/*The World* for these young people is that it is full of anomie and alienation. Uprooted from their past, they inhabit a present that is at best, indifferent, which often brings out the worst in them.

Taisheng's younger cousin who works as a guard at the park is fired for stealing money from the performers' dressing rooms. Bing, Qun's brother, is castigated for spending all his money (and that of his siblings') on gambling and women. Little Sister, an oddly named young man from Taisheng's home town, is crushed to death in a construction accident when he works overtime on an unsafe building site. The scene where his father clad in Mao-style jacket is given a sum of money in reparation for the accident with the understanding that no action will be pursued against the company is one of the many poignant scenes in this film that present the ordinary Chinese as helpless against the economic juggernaut that is modern China.

(spoiler)

The World has an ending that is ambiguous, to say the least. However, if it is placed into the social and economic con-

text that has been outlined above, then its cause (an inadvertent gas leak) becomes symptomatic of the unpredictability and hazards of daily life. Its result (the two leads poisoned) merely another example of the tragedy that awaits the young today in China.

and sophisticated rendering of three complicated characters attempting to engage in intimate adult relationships and, for the most part, failing miserably. The real emotional transactions among these characters occur *between* the lightly tossed-off lines. The lead performances of Ingrid Bergman and Cary Grant are so delicately nuanced and rife with suppressed emotions and desires that it almost hurts to watch as Alicia (Bergman) and Devlin (Grant), at crosspurposes with themselves and one another, repeatedly say the *wrongest* things not only in words but through involuntary gestures and expressions perfectly behaved by the actors.

Then there's the design of the film, the starkly gripping black and white graphic composition within which the messy and conflicted human behaviour plays. And the rightness of the camera at all times. The perfect surface simplicity of the flat medium-two-shot at the race-track is an example: Alicia and Devlin pretend to be watching and chatting about the race, all the while Devlin hurtling and hurtfully perpetuating his emotional abandonment of Alicia as they lay out a soul-devastating plan for her, as conscripted CIA spy. And similarly, later as the plan unfolds, the banality of isolating lateral shot/reverse shots between Alicia and Devlin seated on a park bench, undercover to the world and, emotionally, to one another, as the dangerous betrayals continue. And at the other cinematic extreme, the entirely appropriate

NOTORIOUS

BY LORI SPRING

I love Hitchcock's *Notorious* beyond the attributes that put it on a par with many great movies, including other Hitchcocks. For example, I acknowledge *Vertigo*, which is for many the brightest star in the Hitchcock constellation, as an extraordinary tour de force. But it doesn't trigger as powerfully primal a response in me as does *Notorious*. This 1940's espionage thriller speaks in a language that has some kind of special resonance for me, and to be honest, I can't entirely explain why this is so. But to the extent that I can: I think it's a perfectly wrought film (double-entendre intended). The *Notorious* script, written by Ben Hecht, deftly pulls off an anti-fascist, tension-inducing spy narrative, while quietly lambasting the moral hypocrisy of the supposed CIA-type "good guys". Powerfully embedded in all this is a subtle



virtuousness of the famous key sequence: the tension-inducing quick-cutting in the bedroom suite as Alicia nervously removes a key from Sebastian's keychain while engaging in lightweight banter about Devlin's romantic interest in her, and frighteningly, is almost caught; immediately followed by one of Hitchcock's celebrated crane shots: from high above the checkerboard floor of the mansion's grand front hall as party guests mill about, the camera glides elegantly down and down, to the strains of the chamber orchestra waltz, right into the key now clutched in Bergman's fidgeting hand. An essential Hitchcockian moment—all elements working in

perfect synergy cinematically, narratively, emotionally—a moment greater than the sum of its parts as all the moments comprising this movie seem to me to be.

Some argue that here, as in other Hitchcock films, the lead female character is tormented and humiliated, only to be saved then escorted, spirit broken, into the male-dominated fold. To this I say, not so; such a reading would be reductive and inaccurate. Bergman's character is the heroine of the piece, not just by dint of her courageous willingness to encounter the moral and physical perils of moving into the Nazi mansion, but even moreso because Alicia also takes all the emotional risks. It's the Grant char-

acter who's been wanting in courage, who must transform himself—to become less of a "guy"—to become worthy of her.

Others call into question the unsettling heartlessness of the film's ending: Alicia smiling as the car drives off, leaving behind poor, lovelorn, mother-dominated Sebastian (Rains) to near certain execution by his Nazi colleagues, essentially for being in love with and trusting Alicia. But even the ethical ambiguity of this ending resonates with a complicated emotional *trueness*: Sebastian will die instead of Alicia, who's been saved for true love. And true love, in an ethically troubled world, doesn't come cheap and can never be entirely happily ever after.

RIGHT AGAIN a loving tribute to Stan, Ollie and Leo

BY ROBIN WOOD

During my childhood, in England in the 1930s and into the 40s, movie theatre programmes typically consisted of: a main feature (or 'A' movie), a second feature ('B' movie), a newsreel, and, quite often, a Laurel & Hardy short. The moment their signature tune (commonly known as 'I'm cuckoo, you're cuckoo...') came on, the older family member(s) accompanying me emitted loud groans. But I loved Stan and Ollie, and refused to be influenced by my older siblings' contempt (which today looks more like culpable ignorance). I far preferred them to Chaplin (I didn't discover Keaton until much later). Surprisingly perhaps, time has only confirmed this preference. I have always had problems with Chaplin. While I have learnt to admire the skills, he has almost never made me laugh. I think what gets in the way is the selfconsciousness, the narcissism: the way in which every gesture seems to say 'Look at this, isn't it amazing?'. L&H understood their place and function, as humble entertainers, programme-filers. They never told me I had to love and admire them. I didn't need to be told.

I don't think I grasped that a film had a director until 1938/9, my *annus mirabilis*, the year I look back on as the genesis of my career as a film critic (I was eight years old): the year I first saw *The Lady Vanishes* and *Stagecoach*, when the names of Hitchcock and Ford were on

every filmgoer's lips. (It was also the year of *Only Angels Have Wings*, but my mother decreed that it wasn't 'suitable', on what grounds I know not, so Hawks had to wait). But it was a great many years before I became aware of Leo McCarey, and even more before I fully recognized his importance in Stan and Ollie's joint career. He was 'Supervisory Manager' on most or all of their films during their richest and most prolific period (1928-1930), during which they made thirty short features, and he personally directed three of them. As Supervisory Manager he worked with them on their scripts, encouraging them to go further, developing gags and routines: a fine example of the communal art of Hollywood's great period, and to my mind a further reason for preferring them to Chaplin, who wrote and directed his own films apparently without help or interference, hence with no checks on his egocentricity. The richest periods of art (the Renaissance, the Elizabethan theatre, the Vienna of Mozart) have always been communal in this sense, as against the loneliness of the modern *auteur*. Wouldn't the careers of Fellini, Antonioni and Bergman have been richer for more communality—not merely immediate collaborators such as screenwriters, but the availability of genres, conventions, formulas such as sustained and nurtured Shakespeare—who invented none of his plots (with the possible exception of one of his worst plays) nor blank verse? McCarey remains, even today, one of Hollywood's most underrated directors, perhaps because he disgraced himself by 'naming names' for HUAC (but at least he did it out of personal, if misguided, conviction, not to further his career like Kazan

and others—the director of *Going My Way* and *The Bells of St Mary's* had little to fear), perhaps because he is associated primarily (and correctly) with comedy. But my personal list of the 25 greatest Hollywood films would surely include *Ruggles of Red Gap*, *The Awful Truth*, *Make Way for Tomorrow* and *Rally 'Round the Flag, Boys*.

Of the three films that McCarey directed personally (*We Faw Down*, *Liberty, Wrong Again*), the first is (aside from its famous and often quoted last shot) little known but a treasure in itself, its neglect accounted for perhaps by its lack of startling images, its domestic settings. The second is generally celebrated partly for its audacious though quite 'innocent' hints of gay sex in public places, but more for its prolonged and terrifying acrobatics on vertiginous scaffolding (of which I must confess I tire rather easily). The third is a strong candidate for their greatest short. We have often been told that French Surrealism derived inspiration from silent American comedy, and surely *Wrong Again* must be among the prime examples. The broken, hastily reassembled statue of a female nude, the buttocks now pointing forwards, would surely have delighted the makers of *L'Age d'Or*. But even more remarkable is the white horse on a damaged grand piano supported by Ollie's head replacing one of the legs, the long-held take looking appallingly and agonizingly real. Take away the humour and you have an image that Bunuel and Dali could scarcely have improved upon.

NOTE: Anyone who writes about Laurel and Hardy owes a great debt to Charles Barr's brilliant book on them, among my favourite works of film criticism, to which I return repeatedly.

CINEMATIC MEANING IN THE WORK OF DAVID LYNCH

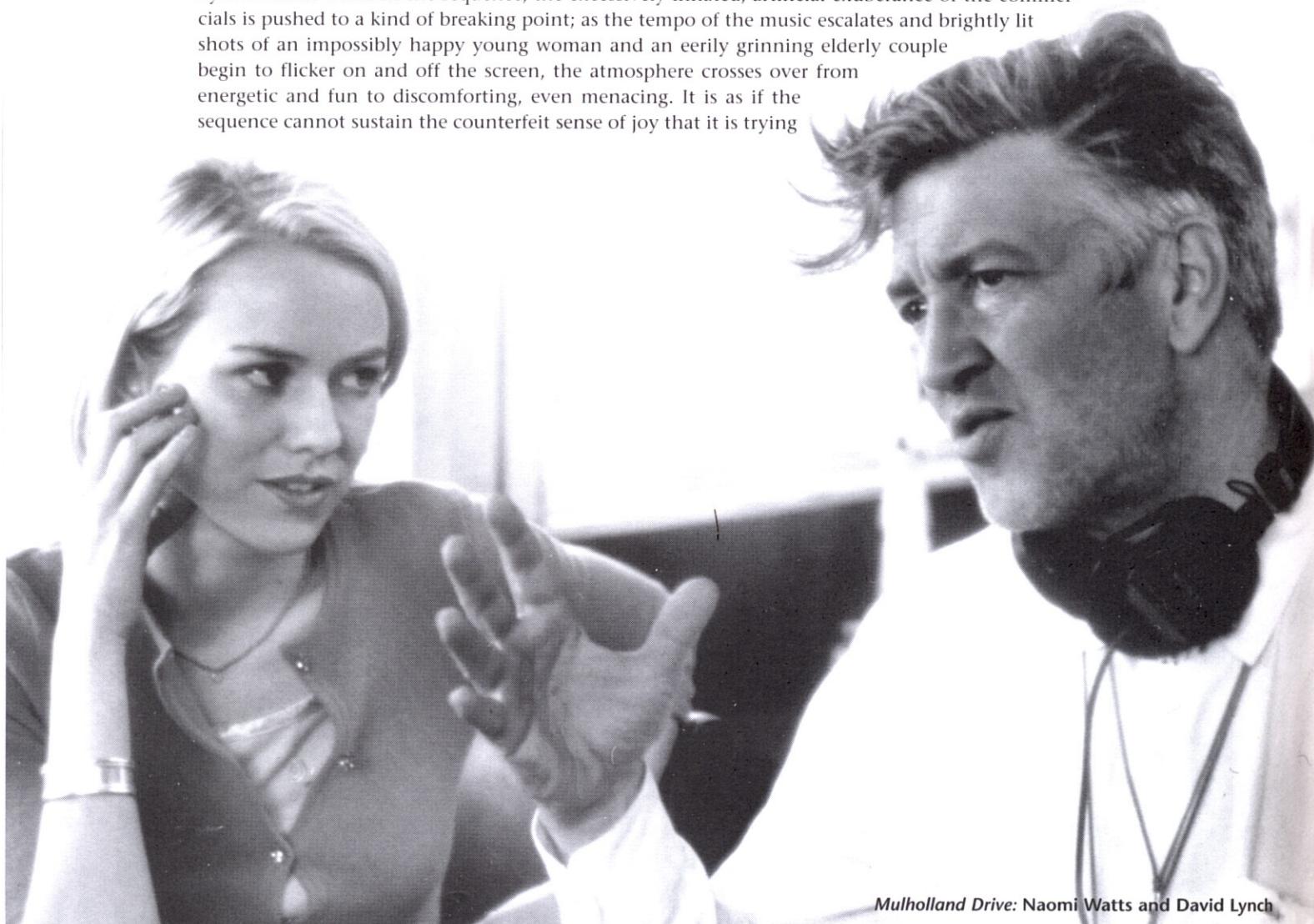
Revisiting *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me*, *Lost Highway*, and *Mulholland Drive*

BY MICHAEL VASS

INTRODUCTION

What does a Gap commercial have to do with *Mulholland Drive*?

Mulholland Drive, David Lynch's most recent and popularly acclaimed film, opens with a montage of young couples dancing the jitterbug against a solid purple backdrop. This sequence is clearly modeled on a series of Gap ads that featured attractive young couples swing dancing against bright monochrome backdrops, which were all over the airwaves around the time Lynch originally shot *Mulholland Drive* as a TV pilot in 1998. It may strike us as odd that the director of *Eraserhead* (1979), whose name can hardly appear in print without adjectives like "cult," "surreal," and "disturbing," would begin a film with a reference to a Gap commercial. And yet in many ways the sequence is in keeping with Lynch's other work. In the sequence, the excessively inflated, artificial exuberance of the commercials is pushed to a kind of breaking point; as the tempo of the music escalates and brightly lit shots of an impossibly happy young woman and an eerily grinning elderly couple begin to flicker on and off the screen, the atmosphere crosses over from energetic and fun to discomforting, even menacing. It is as if the sequence cannot sustain the counterfeit sense of joy that it is trying



Mulholland Drive: Naomi Watts and David Lynch

to convey, cannot manage to conceal the uneasiness and desperation that are lurking just beneath the surface of the image. Since as far back as *Blue Velvet* (1986) Lynch has specialized in staging iconic or clichéd images of American culture in a way that both celebrates the collective power of the images and reveals the disturbing resonances of what they conceal. In this sense, the jitterbug sequence enacts in a condensed form a complex ambivalence at the heart of Lynch's aesthetic: the way the cinematic image* can create moments of startling power and irresistible appeal while at the same time revealing itself as an illusion, an artifice concealing something that we don't want to acknowledge.

However, the sequence also points to a relatively new aspect of Lynch's cinema. In *Blue Velvet* or the *Twin Peaks* television series, the iconic or clichéd images that Lynch subverts seem culled from some sense of collective cultural consciousness and do not explicitly evoke a discussion of the cinematic image per se. Even the multiple references to *The Wizard of Oz* in *Wild at Heart* (1990) seem rooted more in Oz's mythological status within popular culture than in the way it functions specifically as a work of cinema. However, starting with *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me* (1992) and *Lost Highway* (1997), and culminating in *Mulholland Drive* (2001), which is set in Hollywood and introduces the filmmaking process into the narrative itself, there seems to be an increasing desire on Lynch's part to reflect on the process by which cinematic meaning is made.

This recent focus of Lynch's work has received almost no attention from critics and commentators. This may be understandable to a certain degree considering that its most explicit manifestation is in the most recent film. Before the release of *Mulholland Drive* it may have been difficult to perceive any significant links between *Fire Walk with Me*, which was considered an aberration by most at the time of its release, and *Lost Highway*, which seemed to indicate something of a new direction for Lynch. Compounding this problem is the fact that both of the major books on Lynch, Michel Chion's *David Lynch¹* and Martha P. Nochimson's *The Passion of David Lynch²*, were written before the release of *Lost Highway* (both books do have codas briefly discussing the film, though Chion's is only available in an untranslated 1997 French edition). Aside from matters of timing however, this neglect is also indicative of an unfortunate trend that has developed in the critical community concerning Lynch. There is a persistent reluctance to enter into a serious, in-depth examination of Lynch's work; with a few exceptions— including the works by Michel Chion and Martha P. Nochimson, as well as Slavoj Zizek's study of *Lost Highway³*, which I will discuss below—the predominant attitude seems to be that whatever Lynch is up to, you are free to love it or hate it but there is no use trying to understand it.

Of course, a reluctance to over-rationalize every aspect of Lynch's films is understandable and appropriate. However, this is quite different from the refusal to engage in any detailed analysis that we encounter in most of what is written about Lynch.⁴ Whether he is being lauded as innovated and daring⁵ or maligned as self-indulgent, even immoral⁶, critics rarely make much effort to support their opinions with carefully considered readings of his films. I will try to reverse this

trend by investigating Lynch's increasing interest in explicitly exploring the nature of cinematic meaning through a close examination of *Fire Walk with Me*, *Lost Highway*, and *Mulholland Drive*.

LYNCH AND THE REAL

The new directness that characterizes Lynch's recent explorations of how the cinematic image generates meaning materializes in a few basic ways. One of the most noticeable of these is an increasing number of explicit allusions and references to other films. *Lost Highway* quotes, among other things, Maya Deren's *Mesches in the Afternoon* and Robert Aldrich's *Kiss Me Deadly*. *Mulholland Drive* also employs multiple allusions, including nods to Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* and Ingmar Bergman's *Persona*, as well as numerous references to Lynch's own previous films.

The first thing that needs to be addressed is the fact that Lynch's use of reference and quotation does not seem to fit comfortably within any of the theoretical frameworks that are usually used to discuss these techniques. This may, in part, be why these aspects of his recent films have been overlooked. As Zizek notes, it is relatively common for theorists and critics to refer to Lynch in passing as a postmodern filmmaker. Lynch's films contain a self-conscious mixture of high art and popular culture and often seem to emphasize dazzling stylistic surfaces over narrative coherence, all of which situates his work within a host of postmodern issues. In Zizek's words, "the enigma of the coincidence of opposites" that one finds in Lynch's work "is in many ways the enigma of postmodernity itself."⁷ However, when one examines Lynch's films closely, his relationship to postmodernism becomes more problematic.

For instance, Lynch's cinematic references and quotations seem to operate quite differently from the way postmodernism conceives of these devices. Lynch's references are taken from a broad range of cinematic genres and periods—from early experimental cinema to television commercials to European art films to classical Hollywood—but the effect is markedly different from what is usually considered a postmodern approach. Unlike, say, Todd Haynes' use of Sirkian melodrama in *Far from Heaven*, Lynch's allusions do not function as references to specific, fixed cinematic codes that he wishes to speak through, or to speak of. Nor do Lynch's allusions function as pastiches of cinematic surfaces, as do the quotation-packed films of, say, Guy Maddin or Quentin Tarantino (two otherwise dissimilar postmodern filmmakers). Nor, on the other hand, do Lynch's references seem to function in the more modernist sense as attempts to self-consciously link his work to a recognized tradition or history of the cinema—after all what cinematic trajectory could possibly include both Maya Deren and a Gap commercial? So, what is Lynch's relationship to the films that he references?

One thing that distinguishes Lynch's approach from that of postmodernism is that Lynch does not seem to consider cinematic styles and genres as fixed modes of representation that construct various notions of a Real to which we can never have direct immediate access. How then does the Real



Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me

function in Lynch's work? I will try to illustrate that, for Lynch, the cinema is capable of achieving a *specifically cinematic Real*; that is to say that for Lynch the cinema is capable of generating meaning in a way that connects us with an aspect of the Real in a more direct and immediate way than is possible in everyday experience. As we will see, Lynch's allusions and quotations all function to reveal this concept of the cinematic Real through instances of its presence in other films. What is essential about this concept is that the cinematic image does not attempt to represent the Real, rather it creates a viscerally affecting experience for the spectator which opens up access to the Real in a unique and powerful way; the Real is accessed not through the act of representation, but through the *experience* of mediation.

In this sense, Nochimson is correct when she says of Lynch that:

His belief in the image as a possible bridge to the real does not depend on any abstract framework, rather on a visceral sense of the essential truth of an empathetic [...] relationship with art.⁸

However, for Nochimson, this "bridge to the real" has to do with allowing "the finer aspects of our subconscious energies" to "conform us to the life-affirming energies of nature."⁹ In my view, attempting to fit Lynch's aesthetic into this sort of questionable psycho-cosmological system is unnecessary and only further obscures what is actually going on in his films.

On the opposite spectrum, Zizek rejects this "New Age" interpretation, of which he finds Nochimson's book "exem-

plary," and instead proposes a Lacanian reading of Lynch. Zizek understands Lynch's films as attempts to bring the spectator to a confrontation with "the comic horror of the fundamental fantasy"—the Lacanian "Real-impossible" which can never be directly accessed, the unnamable trauma or objectless desire that is not grounded in reality and always eludes being represented directly as fantasy.¹⁰ Regardless of the legitimacy of his Lacanian interpretation (on which I am not qualified to comment), Zizek does touch upon what seems to me an important aspect of Lynch's cinema. Zizek's ideas about the "Real-impossible" in Lynch's work fit well with my belief that, for Lynch, cinematic meaning is forged through access to a cinematic Real which enables viewers to viscerally experience affect and emotion in a uniquely powerful way that is detached from a rational, narrative cause and effect structure. Now, in order to develop these ideas, I will turn to a more detailed discussion of certain relevant aspects of *Fire Walk with Me*, *Lost Highway*, and *Mulholland Drive*.

PROTO-CINEMATIC EPISODES

From *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me*, through *Lost Highway*, to *Mulholland Drive*, one can trace certain significant stylistic and narrative continuities in relation to Lynch's growing concern with explicitly investigating the cinema's unique affective power. One important feature of this is that Lynch increasingly stages episodes that re-enact the revelatory process of cinematic discovery and understanding that he wants his films to offer their spectators. Examples include: in *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me*: the strange FBI video monitor



scene featuring David Bowie as Phillip Jeffries, a lost, spectral agent, and the dream scene that begins with Laura entering a moving photograph on her bedroom wall; in *Lost Highway*: the sinister video images of the camcorder wielding Mystery Man/Robert Blake, and the hyper-noir world of the film's second half; in *Mulholland Drive*: Diane/Naomi Watts' audition scene and the crucial Club Silencio sequence.

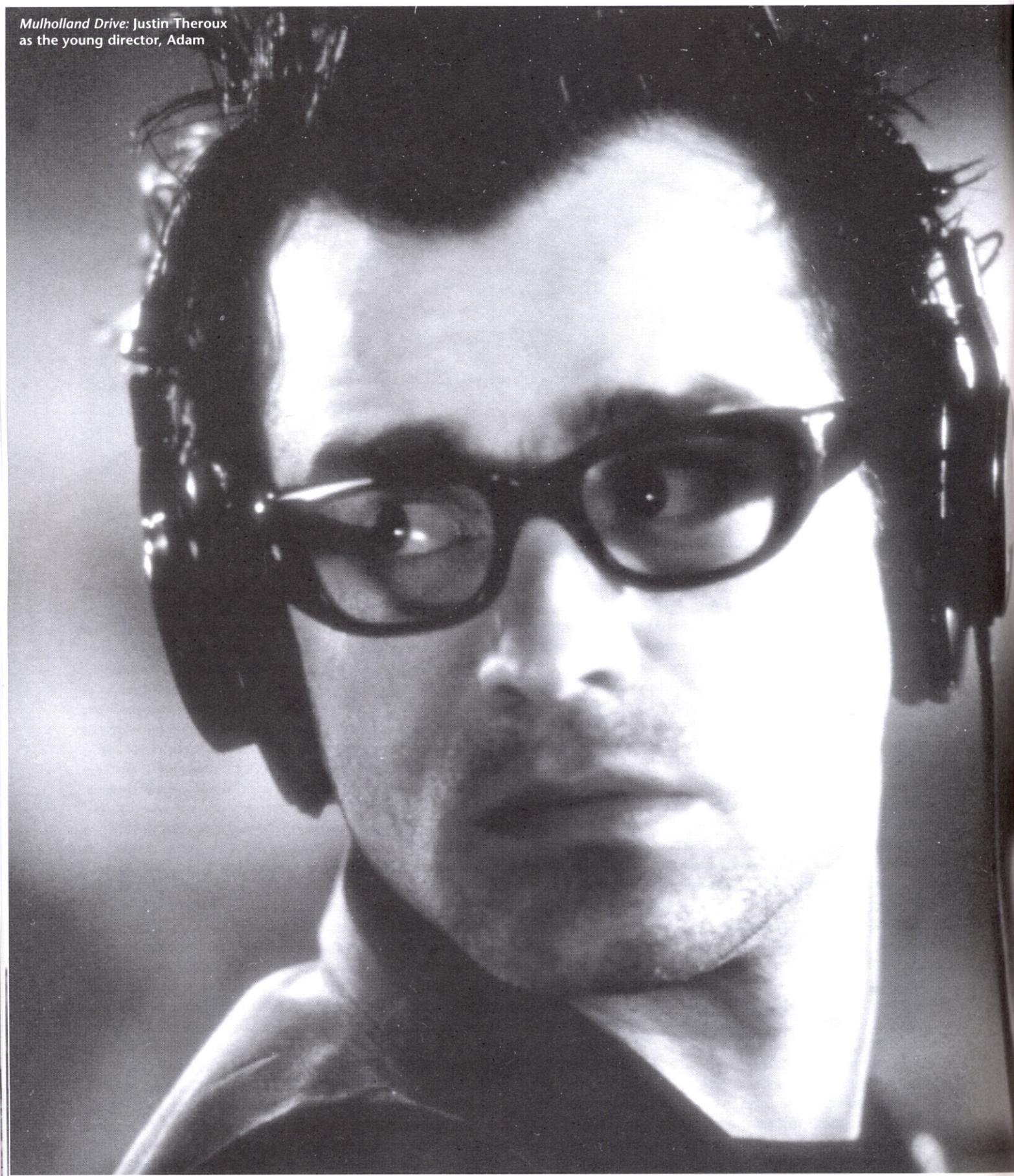
These are variations on a type of sequence that can be found in virtually all of Lynch's films. In his earlier work, these usually take the form of a theatrical/musical performance set on some sort of stage, with the main character watching in the audience. Examples include the Lady in the Radiator in *Eraserhead*, the opera sequence in *The Elephant Man*, and, in *Blue Velvet*, Dorothy/Isabella Rossellini's performance of the title song as well as the Ben/Dean Stockwell's lip sync performance of Roy Orbison's "In Dreams". These scenes bring the narrative to a halt and give full force to the cinema's capacity to create viscerally affecting moods and emotionally revealing moments through the combination of sound, music, image, editing, and acting. The theatrical/musical performances in these episodes always introduce or reveal something crucial to the character that watches them, initiate some emotionally potent but intangible realization that will change his or her outlook from that point on. As spectators of the film Lynch wants our response to mirror the reaction of the spectator-character within the film. We are also powerfully affected and come to some sort of intangible realization, not only through our experience of the theatrical/musical performance, but also through witnessing the character's unsettled response to that performance. In

this way, these episodes function as distillations of the power Lynch sees in the cinematic image.

In these earlier films it is always a private revelation that the characters experience. In *Eraserhead*, the Lady in the Radiator is Henry/Jack Nance's private fantasy of escape; in *The Elephant Man*, being at the theatre for the first time is a private thrill for John Merrick/John Hurt, since no one else can understand how much it means to him; in *Blue Velvet*, seeing Dorothy's performance awakens a new kind of desire within Jeffrey/ Kyle MacLachlan which he can't admit to anyone else, and Ben's "In Dreams" performance is moving to Frank/Denis Hopper in some strange way no one understands, which is in turn terrifying to Jeffrey in some way no one else seems to recognize. When this type of theatrical/musical scene re-appears in his later work, Lynch alters it in significant ways. This is particularly true in *Fire Walk with Me* and *Mulholland Drive*, where the episodes become not private revelations for one character, but shared realizations that occur between characters within the film.

In *Fire Walk with Me* this occurs when Laura Palmer/Shery Lee goes to the Roadhouse bar and sees the performance by the Blue Lady/Julee Cruise. At first this scene functions in a similar way to the above examples, Laura is privately moved to tears by the ethereal performance, which seems to be speaking directly to her tragic fate. But then Donna/Moira Kelly appears, having followed Laura there. Donna sees how the performance is affecting her best friend and this brings her to tears as well. Then, when Laura sees that her despair has been exposed to Donna, this initiates a moving scene of one-upmanship between the two friends in which Donna

Mulholland Drive: Justin Theroux
as the young director, Adam



insists on trying to accompany Laura on her self-destructive path. In *Mulholland Drive* the corresponding scene is the Club Silencio sequence. In this scene the momentary bliss achieved between Betty/Naomi Watts and Rita/Laura Harring collapses as they are moved to tears and convulsions by a powerful Spanish a capella lip sync performance of Roy Orbison's "Crying," which somehow reveals to them that, like the song they are hearing, their relationship is "not real, it's all an illusion."

These two scenes differ from their predecessors by making it explicit that the type of specifically cinematic meaning that is exemplified in these episodes must take place *between* people, as the result of some shared recognition or understanding. Perhaps we can now start to see the value of Nochimson's comment about Lynch's belief in "an empathetic relationship to art." In the earlier scenes this was implied through the way the scenes functioned for the spectator of the film: we were affected largely through witnessing the way the spectator-character was affected by the performance. In these later examples this crucial aspect of shared recognition is dramatized within the scenes themselves.

Lost Highway also contains an interesting variation on the previous form of theatrical/musical performance sequence. In this case, the main character is not a spectator in the audience but a performer on stage. Jazz musician Fred Madison/Bill Pullman is playing saxophone in a club when he sees his wife Renee/Patricia Arquette in the audience, leaving with another man. This contributes to the suspicions and mistrust that will escalate to the level of murderous rage. Interestingly this scene, which is framed as a memory, is presented in silence; we don't hear the music Fred is playing. We could see this scene as an inversion of the musical/performance episodes in *Fire Walk with Me* and *Mulholland Drive* in that it portrays not some shared recognition between characters but their total incapacity to communicate or understand each other (although for the viewer, the sequence itself communicates this void between them beautifully).¹¹

It is important to note that in the above examples, from *Eraserhead* to *Mulholland Drive* these episodes are staged as theatrical or musical performances, and never explicitly reference the cinema itself, though their power for the viewer clearly derives from the way the event of the performance is cinematically expressed. Lynch seems to want to avoid any directly self-conscious or self-reflexive depiction of the cinema, most likely because these are moments when he wants us to be fully invested in the cinematic image, not self-consciously critical of its mechanics or aesthetics. However, with *Fire Walk with Me*, *Lost Highway*, and *Mulholland Drive*, Lynch begins to experiment with ways of staging these proto-cinematic episodes so that they involve elements which link them more directly to the mechanics of the cinema. The presence of some kind of disembodying technological device often plays an important role; video cameras, TV monitors, tape recorders, telephones, answering machines, and radios appear frequently in *Fire Walk with Me*, *Lost Highway*, and *Mulholland Drive*. However, the actual act of filmmaking is still absent (even for the most part in *Mulholland Drive*), thus preserving the potential for the viewer's full emotional investment and avoiding any distancing effect. I will return to this new type

of proto-cinematic episode after examining some other important aspects of *Fire Walk with Me*, *Lost Highway*, and *Mulholland Drive*.

FANTASY/DREAM VS. REALITY IN *LOST HIGHWAY* AND *MULHOLLAND DRIVE*

Most of what has been written on *Mulholland Drive* resists the interpretation that the first section is some kind of dream/fantasy and the second section depicts the "real" events and characters behind the dream/fantasy.¹² This resistance seems to arise because critics and commentators sense that this interpretation will not solve all of the film's mysteries. In many ways this is absolutely correct; no attempt to work out the plot in terms of what is "real" and what is not could ever succeed in discovering what is most important in the film. However, it is curious that no one makes any effort to reconcile this with the fact that in the second part of the film Lynch provides a number of hints and clues that seem to serve no purpose other than to explicitly encourage a dream/fantasy vs. reality interpretation of the narrative. This apparent contradiction seems to me one of the most significant aspects of Lynch's method, especially in *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive*.¹³

While discussing *Lost Highway*, which has a similar two-part, fantasy vs. reality structure as *Mulholland Drive*, Zizek makes the insightful claim that, in the film, fantasy and reality do not have a horizontal relationship, in which one supports the other, but rather a vertical relationship wherein they exist in parallel, each feeding off and sustaining the other.¹⁴ We might add that in *Lost Highway* it becomes essentially impossible (or meaningless anyway) to definitively designate one side as fantasy and one side as reality. All that can be said is that there are two separate realms of action, each of which seems to be ontologically distinct from the other, and that the relationship between them seems to be structured along somewhat similar lines as the relationship between reality and fantasy. On the other hand, *Mulholland Drive* does seem to indicate which section could be read as dream/fantasy and which as reality. However, by constructing the narrative backwards (fantasy first, reality second) Lynch makes it nearly impossible, on a first viewing anyway, to connect all the "clues" of the second part with their manifestations in the first part because the transition between the two sections is so initially disorienting and unexpected. Thus, we can say that in both *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive*, Lynch confuses the distinction between fantasy and reality that the films themselves seem to set up.

Why would Lynch construct what seem to be ontologically distinct realms and then present them in a way that defies definition or categorization? One effect seems to be to give primacy to the cinematic image over narrative coherence. This certainly doesn't mean that there is no narrative explanation, but if one tries to reduce everything to the level of narrative meaning one misses an essential feature of Lynch's work. On the other hand, it would be equally mistaken to deny the existence of any narrative logic and to insist that Lynch simply strings together a series of powerful, loosely connected, free floating images. A crucial aspect of Lynch's

cinema is clearly the complex dynamic at work between the type of meaning that is derived from narrative logic and the immediately affecting, visceral experience of the cinematic image, the way the two modes of understanding feed off and merge with and resist each other all at once.

We could say that Lynch acknowledges that the two states fantasy and reality can be distinguished according to a certain narrative logic, but at the same time he also calls attention to the fact that this division can only take us so far; the most important mysteries will always remain beyond the reach of all narrative explanations. It is not so much that the line between the two states is unclear, rather that the relationship between them is more enigmatic and complex than is usually acknowledged (in the cinema anyway). It is in the mysterious, uncanny atmosphere that results from this complex fluctuation between reality and fantasy that Lynch sees the true potential for the kind of meaning that only the cinema can generate. The cinematic image is able to give expression to the mysteries that always remain unaccounted for by the narrative, and the viewer is able to experience and comprehend them in an immediate, visceral way. This is more valuable to Lynch than solving a film in a narrative sense. In his own words:

To me, a mystery is like a magnet. Whenever there is something unknown there is a pull to it [...] When you only see a part, it is much stronger than seeing the whole. The whole might have a logic, but out of context the fragment takes on tremendous value of abstraction.¹⁵

In considering these issues, it is illuminating to examine some important general structural features shared by *Fire Walk with Me*, *Lost Highway*, and *Mulholland Drive*.

TWO-PART STRUCTURE IN FIRE WALK WITH ME, LOST HIGHWAY, AND MULHOLLAND DRIVE

Each film features two clearly distinct narrative sections. In *Fire Walk with Me*, the first section revolves around two FBI agents investigating the murder of Teresa Banks/Pamela Gidley in the town of Deer Meadow; the second section tracks the last few weeks in the life of Laura Palmer/Sheryl Lee in Twin Peaks, before she is murdered by the same man who killed Teresa (Laura's father, Leland Palmer/Ray Wise). In *Lost Highway*, the first section centers on the increasingly strained relationship between jazz musician Fred Madison/Bill Pullman and his dark haired wife Renee/Patricia Arquette which escalates until Fred kills Renee; the second section is about the torrid affair between Pete, whom Fred has mysteriously transformed into, and Alice/Patricia Arquette, a gangster's moll who looks exactly like Renee, except that she is a blonde. In *Mulholland Drive*, the first section revolves around the growing intimacy between Betty/Naomi Watts, a perky Hollywood newcomer with ambitions to be a star, and Rita/Laura Harring, a sultry amnesiac, as the two search for the latter's true identity; the second section deals with the deteriorating relationship between a washed up Hollywood wannabe named Diane/Naomi Watts, who looks exactly like Betty, and Camilla/Laura Harring, a rising starlet who looks

exactly like Rita, which ends when Diane hires a hit man to kill Camilla, and then kills herself.

The event at the center of each of these three films is a murder that has been committed because of a doomed sexual relationship. In *Fire Walk with Me*, this is the killing of Laura Palmer by her own father Leland, who has been sexually abusing her. In *Lost Highway*, Fred is driven to kill Renee by an increasingly maddening combination of suspicion, sexual humiliation, and resentment. In *Mulholland Drive*, the jilted, bitter Diane hires a hit man to kill her former lover Camilla, after the latter becomes engaged to a man. But in fact, there are actually two crucial murders in each film, the second coming as a direct result of the first. In *Lost Highway*, the second murder is that of Dick Laurent/Robert Loggia, a gangster with whom Renee is involved. In *Mulholland Drive*, the second killing is a suicide rather than a murder, and occurs when Diane shoots herself, unable to live with what she has done to Camilla. In *Fire Walk with Me*, the murder of Laura Palmer is technically the second murder, though it is primary in terms of narrative importance. The murder of Teresa Banks precedes it chronologically, but this still fits the pattern we have identified since this murder is still a consequence of the doomed sexual relationship that ultimately results in Laura's murder (Leland kills Teresa, a teenage prostitute he has been seeing, after he learns that she is involved in prostitution with Laura).

In all three films, despite the literal chronology of the main narrative, there is a sense that both murders have already taken place at the start of the film. In *Fire Walk with Me*, Teresa Banks is killed in the very first scene, and most viewers will know that Laura will be killed at the end of the film because of the TV series (and if they were unfamiliar with the series they would know from the advertising of the film, which promised to reveal the last days of Laura Palmer). *Lost Highway*, with its looping Mobius-strip structure, literally begins and ends with the same two events, both of which are directly connected to Renee's murder, as well as that of Dick Laurent. These are: the announcement on the intercom that "Dick Laurent is dead," which is first received and then delivered by Fred, and a car speeding down a highway at night, accompanied by David Bowie's "I am Deranged." In *Mulholland Drive*, the first thing we see after the jitterbug sequence, is a point of view shot of someone, breathing heavily in a manner that suggests distress, falling back into bed. At the end of the film we will realize that these are, most likely, the final moments before Diane kills herself. And although we see Rita narrowly escape being killed by hit men in the first full scene of the film, we later find out that her counterpart in the second section, Camilla, is killed by a hit man hired by Diane. Thus, in all three films, the two crucial killings are in some way contained in the very beginning of the film, suggesting some alternate chronology of events to the one we are given on screen, loosening the constraints of conventional linear narrative logic.

In both *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive* the two part structure functions in a similar way, which, as we have already discussed, has something to do with fantasy and reality. One part depicts the events leading up to the central murders (the first part in *Lost Highway*, the second part in

Mulholland Drive). The other part can be interpreted as an attempt to restage or re-imagine the basic circumstances that led to the murder in hopes that this will lead to a different ending. Then, when this attempt to take back the murder ultimately fails, it reveals in a new light the original motives behind the murder.

The structure of *Fire Walk with Me* works in a slightly different way. From this perspective the film's relationship with the TV series is crucial. In a sense, the investigation of Laura's murder, which provided the spine of the series, was a continuous attempt to re-imagine and restage the physical circumstances of the murder, as well as a continuous refusal or inability to acknowledge the unsettling emotional circumstances of that murder (the abusive incestuous relationship between Laura and her father). *Fire Walk with Me* can be seen as an attempt to re-imagine the world of the series in a new way (this is the main purpose of the first part of the film, which is set in the anti-Twin Peaks town of Deer Valley) which ultimately comes to the same conclusion, thus, again revealing in a new light the circumstances and motives behind the central murder.

AFFECT AND EMOTION

What we can conclude from these structural similarities is that, in all of these films, the murders and the motivations

behind them—which is to say the *emotions* behind them—form the core of truth around which the rest of the action revolves. In *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive*, we could even say that the murders are the only events that we can be certain definitely occurred. For Lynch, the emotional/affective circumstances surrounding the murders effectively constitute the Real in the films. If we are to say we *understand* either of these films, this must mean that we have grasped the affective/emotional logic behind the events of the murders, not necessarily the literal circumstances of their occurrence. We understand the desperate humiliation and rage that drives Fred, in *Lost Highway*, and Diane, in *Mulholland Drive*, to such an awful, unthinkable extreme as murder (though our understanding in no way excuses them). We understand the confusion and hopelessness that torment Laura in *Fire Walk with Me* and drive her to such severe, self-destructive behavior, which in turn torments her guilty father and drives him to kill her (though again, our understanding neither condemns her nor excuses him). In other words, we understand the emotional/affective causes and consequences of the events, which do not always translate into the kind of rational cause and effect logic that is usually used to structure a narrative.

For Lynch, one of the great powers of the cinema is its capacity to uncover and reveal this emotional/affective logic, which otherwise appears irrational and incomprehensible. This same seemingly irrational logic may be similar to that



which governs unconscious subjective states, and this accounts for the dreamlike atmosphere of Lynch's films, as well as for the frequency with which scenes of dreams, fantasies and memories appear within the films. However, to insist, as Nochimson does, that Lynch's whole body of work is founded on some notion of the "liberating power of subconscious energies" is misleading. Lynch is not trying to recreate these subjective subconscious states or even to represent them accurately. He is aware that the cinema differs from them in a number of crucial ways, and, moreover, that it is precisely from these differences that the cinema derives its true power. Cinematic meaning is not a totally subjective, isolated (and isolating) experience, as is dreaming, fantasizing, remembering, etc. Rather, as we have already seen, for Lynch cinematic meaning is a *shared* experience, generated *between* people. And we don't need Nochimson's appeal to some quasi-Jungian notion of the collective unconscious to explain this. Whether this empathetic relationship takes place between individual audience members, between filmmaker and audience, or between performer and audience, the important thing is that a film is a concrete phenomenon and exists in the world, not just in the mind of a single person. The cinema is able to give palpable expression to the internal, irrational logic of emotional/affective states, and thus enables us to communicate them in way that would otherwise be impossible. We can perhaps see more clearly now the significance of the FBI security camera scene in *Fire Walk with Me* and the mysterious videotapes in *Lost Highway*: both speak to the capacity of the cinematic image to express, give external form to, what would otherwise remain a subjective, seemingly irrational logic.

The reason that the cinematic image is capable of this is that somehow, despite the overwhelming predominance given to narrative in the cinema, it has developed into a form that allows what should appear as great gaps in narrative logic to be accepted as making some kind of sense beyond conventional narrative logic. Here we can start to see the role of cinematic references and allusions in Lynch's later work, particularly *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive*. Lynch's main points of references here are Hollywood films that feature some strange, irrational logic. This is most pronounced in the second part of *Lost Highway*, which is structured around numerous references to Robert Aldrich's *Kiss Me Deadly*, one of the most unusual *film noirs* of the 1950's. Aldrich's film brought into the open and exploded (literally) all of the irrational, paranoid, nihilistic, sadistic, apocalyptic undercurrents that were lurking just below the surface of most *noirs*. Similarly, *Mulholland Drive* features numerous allusions to Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* (including the very title of the film). Narrated by a corpse we see floating in a pool in the very first scene and featuring a hauntingly disorienting sense of time, Wilder's film tells the story of how Hollywood sucked the life out of a failed screenwriter and a few others. As we have already noted, what Lynch is alluding to in these films is not their place within the cinematic cannon, nor is it their stylistic surfaces. Rather, what is crucial about these films for Lynch is the way that they explicitly allow a seemingly irrational emotional/affective logic to clash with, and at times overtake, a more conventional narrative logic. These films



thus become prime instances of what I have called a specifically cinematic Real in Lynch's work, a unique conception of the way that cinema generates meaning.

We can now see that the function of this fantasy/reality structure in *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive* is not simply some convenient or clever narrative device, nor is meant it to reveal anything precise about the actual relationship between fantasy and reality (which is why psychoanalytic readings of Lynch can never really be satisfying). Rather Lynch stages these realms as distinct, even opposed, in order to enable himself to fully explore the cinema's potential to create a type of experience for the viewer that crosses between and overlaps



the experiences of fantasy and reality that we are used to. For Lynch, cinematic meaning conflates the subjective, phantasmagoric truths that we imaginatively invent in our dreams and fantasies with the literal, quotidian, shared truths that constitute our sense of everyday reality, in order to unearth the affective/emotional truths that are otherwise so difficult to grasp.

MULTIPLE REALMS IN *FIRE WALK WITH ME*, *LOST HIGHWAY*, AND *MULHOLLAND DRIVE*

All three films feature different realms that clearly have a distinct ontological status from each other. As we have already discussed, in *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive*, the two nar-

rative sections clearly belong to two ontologically distinct realms that seem to have something to do with the relationship between fantasy and reality, and yet cannot ever quite be definitively delineated by these terms. Characters and situations from one section reappear transformed or altered in some way in the other section, however, in both films there are also characters that exist in the same form in both sections and that seem to have some understanding of the relationship between the two realms: the Mystery Man in *Lost Highway*, and the elderly couple in *Mulholland Drive* are the clearest examples. The existence of these characters seems to speak to the existence of yet another realm that appears to

oversee the other two and move between them. In *Fire Walk with Me*, on a literal level the two narrative sections both appear to have the same ontological status and are distinct from each other only by the time and place of their setting, though as both Chion and Nochimson point out on a thematic level the town of Deer Valley functions "like a black hole somewhere in the universe, it is the absolute negation of Twin Peaks, an anti-Twin Peaks."¹⁶ However, in *Fire Walk with Me* there is also an ontologically distinct realm that links the two narrative sections. This corresponds to the overseeing realms in *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive* but is even more developed and intricate than in those films. This is the realm of the Red Room and its host the Man from Another Place, as well as a number of characters, including Mike the one-armed man, Bob, and the Old Woman and the Masked Boy. And of course, there is FBI agent Dale Cooper/Kyle MacLachlan, who is unique in that he is clearly situated within the realm of the basic narrative—he is investigating the murder of Teresa Banks and will, we know, be investigating the murder of Laura Palmer—but he has access to the more elusive other realm as well.

It would take a detailed analysis of each of the films to work out the precise role of these individual characters within their respective films. However, we should be able to see that the function of the strange characters that populate the mysterious overseeing realm in Lynch's work is clearly not to signify his belief in some literal hidden dimension, nor is it to represent some aspect of a character's psyche or some abstract force (such as "evil"). Their true function is to dramatize the way cinema can move between and participate in seemingly distinct realms of existence (such as fantasy and reality) without ever quite belonging to either one. These characters provide a sort of cinematic consciousness that belongs to the film itself, apart from any single character. Like the Mystery Man in *Lost Highway*, who is simultaneously here and there, inside and outside, real and imagined, for Lynch the cinematic image always inhabits a space in between fantasy and reality, never entirely one or the other (and never simply mixture of the two either), never exclusively inside a single subjectivity but never outside subjectivity altogether.

TRANSITIONS

In each of the three films, the transition between the two sections features one of the new types of proto-cinematic scenes that we touched on before, involving more direct references to the cinema. This is significant because it illustrates that what is most important about the two-part/multiple realm structure that Lynch uses is the specifically cinematic way that we are able to move from one section/realm to another.

In *Fire Walk with Me* the proto-cinematic episode is the strange scene in which agent Cooper comes into the FBI office and insists on acting out a dream he has recently had. He proceeds to stand in the hallway positioned under a security camera for a moment, and then rushes into the security room around the corner to check the monitor. He does this three times and the third time he checks the monitor he sees that his image has remained frozen on screen, so that he appears to simultaneously be in the hallway and be in the

security room looking at the monitor. Then, on the monitor we see a man emerge from an elevator at the end of the hall and walk past Cooper's frozen image into the main office. Cooper leaves the security room and rushes into the office where he is told that the man is an agent named Phillip Jeffries/David Bowie who has been missing for sometime. Jeffries then begins to utter a string of frantic, confused, disconnected phrases about someone named Judy and a room above a garage, as a frenetic montage begins featuring characters (including the Man from Another Place, Mike, and Bob) in eerily effected shots (reverse audio and image, superimpositions, slow motion, etc...). When this montage ends, Jeffries has vanished and Cooper and the others are told by the front desk that he was never there. But when they check the security tape, sure enough it shows Jeffries coming down the hall past Cooper's frozen image.

In *Lost Highway* the transitional episode is a culmination of a series of scenes in which Fred and Renee receive mysterious videotapes that show up on their doorstep. The first tape shows grainy black and white shots of the outside of their house. The second begins the same way but then cuts to an even grainier shot moving through the hallways inside the house, a shot that we had previously seen as Fred's point of view in a dream in which he was looking for Renee. The third tape, which Fred watches alone, has the same two shots as the previous tape, but adds an even grainier shot that continues into the bedroom where Fred sees himself standing over Renee's bloody corpse with a knife in hand. From this point the film cuts to Fred already in police custody for the murder.

In *Mulholland Drive* there are two main transitional scenes of this kind. The first is Betty's audition scene, in which she transforms a clichéd, soap opera caliber script into a distressingly seductive and emotionally potent performance which provides a glimpse of the pain and desperation that will consume her when she becomes Diane in the second part of the film. This scene is unique among the other proto-cinematic episodes in that it concerns itself not with the way sound, music, image and performance combine to generate cinematic meaning, but rather, illustrates that this can be achieved solely through the unsettling, irrational, seemingly miraculous power of acting in the cinema, its ability to express otherwise indescribable emotional/affective states¹⁷. The second proto-cinematic transitional episode in *Mulholland Drive* is the Club Silencio scene, already discussed above, in which the revelation of the disembodying technology behind the powerfully affecting illusion of the heart-wrenching performance effectively undermines and destroys the illusion of bliss that momentarily existed between Betty and Rita.

In fact, when we look closely at the films we see that almost every time elements from one realm seep into and destabilize the other, every time the mysterious overseeing realm disrupts the narrative, Lynch communicates this through the use of some special cinematic technique such as slow motion, reverse motion, strobe lighting, superimpositions, distorted images, overtly stylized use of sound or music, etc. These moments occur too frequently throughout the films to make a full list, but examples would include the following.

In Fire Walk with Me:

The reverse sound and motion in the Red room
 The scenes in which the old woman and the masked boy materialize from nowhere and then dissolve into thin air
 The slow-motion drone of the ceiling fan outside Laura's bedroom, which we see whenever her father has sex with her
 The unusual sound mix in the traffic jam scene in which the one armed man confronts Laura and Leland

In Lost Highway:

The Mystery Man's face appearing to Fred superimposed over Renee's face, which follows their failed lovemaking and his dream about killing her
 The backward exploding beach house that appears to Fred in prison before he transforms into Pete
 The flickering slow motion shot of Alice accompanied by Lou Reed's "Magic Moment" that occurs the first time Pete sees her (which is also the first time we see her as Alice the blonde)
 The strobe lighting and lens distortions that occur first as Pete wanders down the halls of Andy's house looking for Alice, then later as Fred walks through the halls of the Lost Highway Motel searching for Renee

In Mulholland Drive:

The scene at the film studio in which Betty and a young director named Adam exchange a long, meaningful, slow-motion gaze accompanied by the 50's pop song "Sixteen Reasons"
 The superimpositions that multiply the images Betty and Rita so that they fan out overtop of each other, which occur right after they find Diane Selwyn's corpse
 The numerous strobe and fog effects, as well as the physically impossible appearances and disappearances that occur in the Club Silencio sequence
 The miniaturization of the elderly couple and the strobe and smoke effects that occur as the two of them chase Diane into the bedroom and drive her to shoot herself
 The blue box into which the camera disappears at the end of the first section

Lynch is routinely accused of self-indulgence for his repeated use of these kinds of stylistic devices, which many see as empty, self-indulgent, MTV inspired flourishes¹⁸. However, we should now be able to see that, on the contrary, these devices are an integral part of Lynch's complex concept of how cinematic meaning is generated.

CONCLUSION

Discussing the ceiling fan in *Fire Walk with Me*, Chion says that such elements in Lynch's work should not be taken symbolically, "nor can they be reduced to some primary function. They are life itself, vital power, absurd, ever-present." We could add that, for Lynch, these stylistic devices create space for a kind of special cinematic perception, they grasp "life itself" in a specifically cinematic way. These are moments in which the normal boundaries of time, space and identity become less rigid and the lines dividing past and present, memory and fantasy, dream and reality become blurred,

momentarily freeing us from conventional, linear, cause and effect logic and giving us access to a more intangible and complex affective/emotional experience. These moments enable us to perceive events in their totality somehow, cause and effect, intention and consequence, hope and regret, desire and resentment, all rolled into one inextricably tangled web and experienced viscerally in a sustained flurry of sound, image, music, and performance. In this sense, Nochimson is correct in her insistence that Lynch wants to free us from the limiting perspective of rational order, but her claim that he is trying to open us up to the "liberating powers of the subconscious" is misleading. It would be more accurate to say that he is trying to open us up to the liberating powers of the cinema.

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*Throughout this essay I use the term 'cinematic image' to refer to the all forms moving image/sound combinations (the emphasis on the role of sound in Lynch's cinema can hardly be overstated)—including television, video, and film—as Lynch makes no *a priori* distinctions between the way these mediums function.

NOTES

- 1 Michel Chion, *David Lynch*, Trans. Robert Julien, British Film Institute, 1995.
- 2 Martha P. Nochimson, *The Passion of David Lynch: Wild At Heart in Hollywood*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1997.
- 3 Slavoj Zizek *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime: On David Lynch's Lost Highway*. The University Of Washington Press, Seattle. 2000
- 4 A recent exception to the reactionary approach is George Toles' superb examination of *Mulholland Drive* in the Fall 2004 Film Quarterly
- 5 Stephen Holden on *Mulholland Drive*: "By surrendering any semblance of rationality to create a post-Freudian, pulp-fiction fever dream of a movie, Mr. Lynch ends up shooting the moon." in "Mulholland Drive: Hollywood Seen as a Fun House Fantasy" New York Times 10/06/2001
- 6 Roger Ebert on *Lost Highway*: "it really is all an empty stylistic facade. This movie is about design, not cinema... I felt jerked around." "Lost Highway review" Chicago Sun-Times 02/27/1997
- 7 Zizek, 3
- 8 Nochimson, 9.
- 9 bid. 9
- 10 Zizek, 43-44
- 11 These sequences, in all of their manifestations, also speak to the importance of music and sound in Lynch's concept of a cinematic Real. In each of the sequences discussed above, it is the music (or lack thereof in *Lost Highway*) that carries the emotional and affective force and which opens up a new understanding in the spectator-characters and in the viewers. As the Club Silencio scene makes explicit, it is the music itself, not necessarily even the lyrics, which generates the bulk of meaning in these scenes.
- 12 As examples of this see Nochimson's review of *Mulholland Drive* in *Film Quarterly* Fall 2002 (vol. 56, #1) and Philip Lopate's "Welcome to L.A." *Film Comment* Sept/Oct 2001 (vol. 37, #5)
- 13 The exception to this critical trend is the previously mentioned piece in *Salon.com* by Wyman, Garrone and Klein, which provides the most thorough and well considered version of the fantasy' vs. reality interpretation that I have encountered.)
- 14 Zizek, 35.
- 15 David Lynch, *Lynch on Lynch*, ed. by Chris Rodley. Faber and Faber Limited, London, 1997, 231.
- 16 Chion, 148.
- 17 For more on this scene see the George Toles article mentioned above.
- 18 As examples of this, see Stephanie Zacherel's review of "Lost Highway" at <http://dir.salon.com/feb97/highway970228.html>

LOOKING AT LOLA, LOOKING AT CINÉMA

BY JASON WILCOX

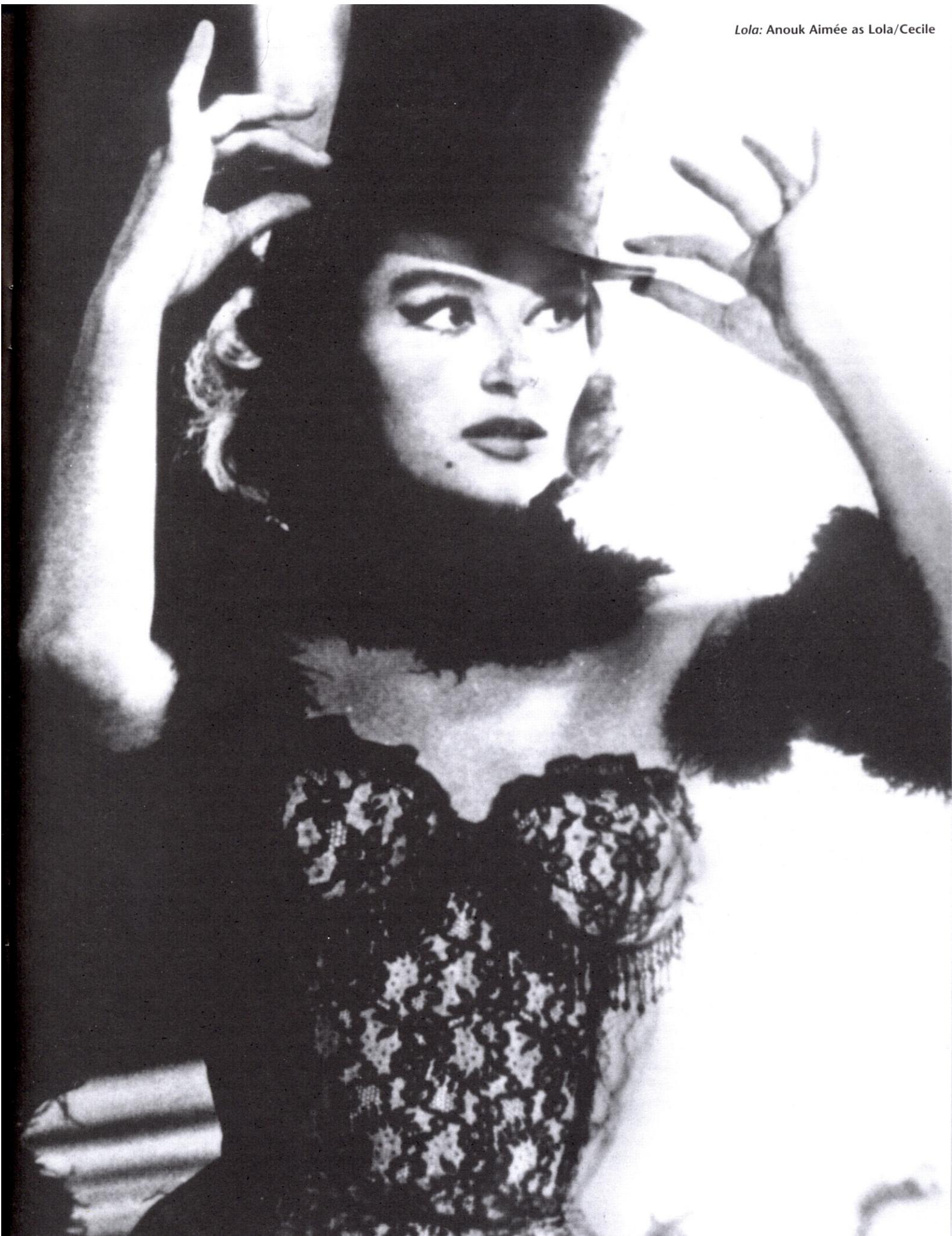
"The deepest prejudices are ontological ones—commitments to the nature of the real. The largely unquestioned prejudice today is that reality is only what is observable from a third-person point of view, that is, thoroughly objectifiable and measurable entities or events. This must prejudice us against our own reality, for we are the beings that idealize and fantasize and that exist in others' fantasies and idealizations concerning us." —Bruce Wilshire¹

I. PRELIMINARIES, NAMES AND IDENTITIES

Human beings, being both biological and cultural, may be said to inhabit two worlds, although it is probably impossible to disentangle the one from the other either in our dreams or our "everyday life". The evolution of human culture and language, whose catalyst was ritual, required both intense creative effort and sublimation of certain biological instincts. The creation of symbolism may be regarded as the concomitant of an achieved collective fiction whereby an entire community agrees that it has assumed a shared identity (we may call it society)—which it periodically enacts in its rituals, so that this identity may actually be experienced (in which the human body becomes metaphorized). The forms of art which we know today all—necessarily—derive from this original experience, in which the first human beings were both actors and audience, subjects and objects of themselves. In this regard we may realize that human identity is not a simple, self-evident concept. Indeed, each of our names suggests both something unique to ourselves alone and something ancestral, antedating our own birth (both "Christian" name and "surname"). The particular patriarchal nature of contemporary western society is confirmed by the act of marriage, by which females have (or did have, at least until recently) to forego their maiden name to assume the surname of their husband, with effects for their sense of identity and worth which it is probably impossible to calculate.

Human ritual involves a doubling of identity—a sense that we are as human beings at once fully individual and fully social. When, around the end of the last ice age about 10,000 years ago, the original ritual structure that guaranteed the coherence of hunter-gatherer society could, for various reasons, no longer sustain itself, human

Lola: Anouk Aimée as Lola/Cecile



identity and society reached a point of crisis, the consequences of which we are living with up to this day. Instead of being something applied to the body in the forms of body paint or cosmetics ("making oneself up", creating a world from the world, "cosmetics" from "cosmos"), art became displaced onto other objects—monuments such as the first stone circles (originally decorated with the figures of game animals), which were constructed to keep alive the memory of something which had been lost: namely the ritual enactments which were an intrinsic part of a (by this time) displaced hunter-gatherer economy. The one original "art" (the making of something "artificial", a socio-cultural identity out of an individual-animal identity) became subsumed into a variety of "arts", at first confined to the religious domain, but increasingly separated from it, just as religion has become a problematic concept as it has diverged from its original economic context of hunter-gathering (when religion itself would be more accurately defined as ritual, since it originates as an activity or experience rather than an object of belief or worship). Of course, the human body still partakes of art in its dramatic forms, in which, initially, there was no easy division between audience and actor.

In an agricultural (and post-agricultural?) economy, the "other world" of ritual becomes transposed to a new metaphysical level, so that "reality" is, initially at least, identified with a world beyond death, "illusion" with life on earth. Medieval mystery plays, for example, prioritised the play world over the "everyday" world outside². By the time of the Renaissance, this state of affairs was being called into question, as another crisis in human identity occurred: a new sense of individualism successfully attempted to reverse ontological priorities, so that—gradually—"reality" was identified with life on earth, "illusion" with forms of deception. Shakespeare's plays are to a large extent an interrogation of this crisis, and it is for this reason, critics have suggested, that they are so reflexive (a comparable sense of reflexivity is in evidence in the greatest art of the period—for example, in Caravaggio and Velazquez, as well as other writers such as Cervantes). Drama began to reflect reality, to hold the "mirror up to nature", rather than to stand apart from—or against it. There is a shift—on each occasion the movement precipitating a crisis that led to an explosion of creativity—from original ritual participation, through to religious didacticism, and finally (?) to secular entertainment.

II. CINEMA AS ART AND/OR ENTERTAINMENT

Most people, I would say, would regard Shakespeare's drama as both art and entertainment, as he tells a story which involves an audience (there is a "willing suspension of disbelief") as well as, within this narrative structure, touching on fundamental questions such as "what is reality?", "what is identity?", etc., and most often doing this by drawing the audience's attention to the medium in which he is working, while also being careful not to break their involvement in the fiction. The audience, for Shakespeare and other dramatists of his age (although Shakespeare is by far the most reflexive), is not a mere passive consumer. In cinema the most obvious candidate for an equivalent to Shakespeare in this regard is

Alfred Hitchcock, even though, unlike Shakespeare, he confined himself mostly to working in one genre. Critics have long recognized Hitchcock's reflexivity, his pronounced concern with the act of looking, the deceptions of appearances (or "acting") and the mysteries of identity (see, for example, *Vertigo*). Otherwise, reflexivity has been generally more common amongst "arthouse" directors, although postmodern Hollywood has recently made reference to earlier Hollywood films and film-makers who were themselves—ironically—making works which made reference to the medium of film—for example, Todd Haynes' reworking of Douglas Sirk's films of the 1950s, the Coen Brothers' use of Preston Sturges.

In France in the late 1950s the *nouvelle vague* was born from the first generation of people who had grown up during the "golden age" of Hollywood cinema (the 1930s and 1940s). Jacques Demy (born in 1931) was part of this generation, although probably not the name that would first come to mind as a *nouvelle vague* director. Although still less well-known, Demy's debut, *Lola*, is at least as considerable an achievement as Godard's *A bout de souffle* or Truffaut's *Les 400 coups*. In this film, like Hitchcock, he makes something which confounds the boundaries between "art" and "entertainment", involving the audience in a story but also questioning his medium, drawing our attention to its dangers as well as its joys.

III. LOLA

"In human life the actual does not exist in isolation from the possible, the ideal, and the fictional."

—Bruce Wilshire³

"Where all things gaze themselves, and doubt If they be in it or without."

—Andrew Marvell, "Upon Appleton House"

Just as in a theatre the curtain is raised to announce the beginning of the play, Demy begins his film (after providing food for thought in the epigraph, "Pleure qui peut. Rit qui veut", indicating the complexity of what we are about to see) by opening the iris, darkness becoming light. There is the sound of seagulls and the sea on the soundtrack, followed by a romantic theme as the film's title comes up (together with the dedication to Max Ophuls—for whose final protagonist, Lola Montes, "life is movement") and a white cadillac drives towards the camera. The man, dressed all in white apart from his dark glasses and wearing a Stetson, gets out of the car and looks at the sea. His eyes being covered by his glasses, we cannot make out his expression, even though he is looking almost directly at us, his audience. The smoke from his cigar makes definition even more difficult. As does the slow dissolve from his face to a shot of the sea. It is a moment of "pure cinema": dreamlike, obscure, untranslatable, seemingly beyond narrative necessity (although how can we be sure? We are to discover later that his son was conceived by the sea; and we may be reminded of this moment in the scene in which Cecile smokes her first cigarette while directly facing the camera), reflexive in the sense surely that it raises subtle questions about its own status, its own *raison d'être*. This

unidentified man seems to come towards us out of another world, a world of myth or unreality, or maybe Hollywood⁴. No matter from where, he draws us into the illusion which he helps to create.

As those familiar with the film will know, there are several narrative strands to *Lola*. The opening scenes of the film introduce all of them economically. The driver returns to his car and speeds on towards his destination, Nantes (Demy's hometown but also, together with Paris, the favourite location of the surrealists, to whom Demy is much indebted and whose sensibility he shares). As he drives through the docks he almost collides with a group of American sailors, who—for contemporary audiences, at least—would immediately bring to mind films such as *Anchors Aweigh* or *On the Town*, Hollywood musicals devised around the theme of sailors on leave with limited time which makes them all the more determined to enjoy it (like everyone when they are "on leave" from their work)⁵. We then cut abruptly to Roland, the man who is to become the audience's main—but not exclusive—"identification" figure. He has been immersed in a book, which he now quickly closes, saying aloud "Hell. I'm late" before dashing out. The window of his room displays a view of the docks and what is apparently the same road we have seen in the previous shot; but now the white cadillac and the sailors are not in sight, so it is as if—when Roland looks out of the window—we could say that he is "late": for the previous scene which we have seen but he has missed.

Something similar is to occur in the following scene, in the cafe. Here one of the themes of the film is set up, the seeming opposition between work and freedom (Roland, having been reading, is late for his job, just as we may be avoiding work by watching this film); but this element is set aside when Jeanne enters the cafe full of excitement (we find out later she lives there, and is presumably the owner), saying she has seen her son Michel (so have we, although we do not know it yet: he is the driver of the car)—"Don't you believe in the significance of dreams?" she asks. "I do. I saw him last night...In a dream of a car, a vision right out of the 'Arabian Nights'." Here I think it is more than likely that we do make a connection with what she is saying and the scenes which we have just seen, and Demy at once refers through a character in his film to the film we are watching, and connects the experience of watching the film to the experience of dreaming (here again he is at one with the surrealists).

From the cafe we move to a scene between Roland and his employer. The dialogue is short and to the point: "You have your head in the clouds", Roland is told. "I just dream a bit", he replies. "Unhealthy. One must face facts!" The employer's attitude would no doubt strike a chord with most filmgoers and their motivation for going to the cinema—to dream a little, to forget facts, if only for a couple of hours. *Lola*, however, this film that we are watching, is revealing itself to be more than merely an "escapist entertainment", since it is already clearly concerning itself with one of the fundamental problems of life in contemporary western civilization: the work/play dichotomy, which tends to make both sides meaningless. Roland, quoting a "great novel" (is it *The Charter-House Of Parma*) tells his employer: "A man cannot truly live if he works twelve hours a day without knowing why. The fact

is, I don't know why I'm working." (Couldn't this be true of us too? Doesn't the film industry, as well as other "dream factories", exist generally to exploit, rather than explore, this problem?). As he dismisses him his employer says: "Then come back and see me when you do know."

Roland never does "come back". Instead, in the following scene, we see him in front of a cinema, while an alarm bell ringing outside serves—it seems—both to warn him and to draw him in (to the excitements and danger of "larger-than-life" situations which may give rise to emotions which cannot find outlets anywhere in the world outside the cinema?). There is a poster for a Gary Cooper film playing, *Return to Paradise*. In this scene Demy is obviously foregrounding his medium directly—elsewhere he does so more obliquely, and in many different ways. It is significant, for example, that Roland appears to have been working (for three days) for a publishing company, with the tacit assumption being that the publishing industry does not satisfy him: like most jobs in the modern world, it serves an economic function only, even if (in this case, as well as in the case of the film industry) it is the job of "selling dreams" to a mass public.

Regarding *Return to Paradise*: it is not obvious what relationship we (as viewers of *Lola*) are invited to assume toward it: the title refers ostensibly to Matareva, though it could also be a reference to cinema itself (see note 4). Regrettably, I have been unable to see the film, yet from a description I have read it would seem to bear some relationship to the plot of *Lola*. Michel's character is equivalent to the Gary Cooper character in the film. An obviously "star" actor, Cooper here plays a solider-of-fortune who has a child out of wedlock on the Pacific island of Matareva, but then deserts it. Years later he comes back to find his daughter, and discovers that she is in love with an American pilot. It seems that the pilot is about to do to his daughter what he (Cooper) did to the mother: make her pregnant and then leave. On paper this makes Cooper sound unsympathetic, and the same could be said of the character of Michel in *Lola* on paper. The fact is, however, that "star" actors cannot be treated in the same way as non-star, or "character" actors (who are more like you and me—or Roland). They are a contemporary equivalent of the role traditionally occupied by ruling monarchs, at least while the concept of the "divine right of kings" held currency (Shakespeare's plays are full of analogies between acting and kingship, especially when—as they often do—they concern monarchs whose power is somehow "unauthorized", usually through usurpation or abdication). On a social level, these "stars" may somehow be said to validate—or "authorize" us. In other words, our identities may be inextricably connected to them, even though we almost certainly have never met them "in real life". In *Lola* Demy seems to be both criticizing and acclaiming this tendency. On the one hand it is a dangerous engulfment of individual identity in something illusory (an "escape" in the worst sense); on the other it is a just rebellion against the inadequacy of the actual world around us to "meet the requirements of the imagination" (to adapt Henry James' phrase). It should also be noted that the actor who plays Michel (Jacques Harden) was not a star; and also he is only a minor player in a film whose title role is played by Anouk Aimée (who had just found some fame in Fellini's *La*



The Blue Angel: the original Lola

Dolce Vita). Roland goes in to watch the film; outside the sailors pass by, casually commenting that they have already seen it ("I saw that in Honolulu. It's fine."). They are headed somewhere else: we cut to another building which bears a resemblance to the cinema, and which provides its audience with another kind of entertainment (or perhaps it is a matter of degree rather than kind): the "Eldorado" cabaret. The name, of course, speaks volumes. Isn't "Eldorado" what we all wish to find? (Marguerite Duras has called it "Eden Cinema"). Instead of a poster of Gary Cooper outside there is a poster of Lola (Anouk Aimée, the star of the film we are watching). "Hey! Get a look at that girl!" one of them says. We soon will.

The sailors go on inside and find themselves in a world of make-believe, since what occurs inside is highly improbable (and yet not altogether inconceivable—for which the same can be said of the film as a whole, which makes for its powerful and disturbing effect on the viewer). It is important to note that they are breaking in on a rehearsal—rather than a performance (while—of course—in the film we are watching it *is* a performance, though it does not *feel* like that). The cabaret owner, who would surely be at home in a western saloon (I wonder what film Demy had in mind?), is not at all upset but says immediately: "Champagne for everyone!" The sailors are greeted as if they are old friends (which seems both to be true and not true: the sailor who has remarked on the poster of Lola outside also remarks of the dancers rehearsing inside: "Hey, look at those girls!" as if he were seeing them for the first time. And yet when Frankie talks to Lola a few moments later he tells her "I'd like to sleep with you again, Lola" and it is obvious that they do know each other already and that the sailors may have visited the "Eldorado" before, perhaps many times. So what is going on? Could it be that the sailor is addressing us—the film audience—when he asks us to "look at those girls"?—which would constitute an alienation effect of a Shakespearian rather than Brechtian kind, since it provokes a sort of confused wonder rather than a springing to attention of our critical faculties⁶: and of course it is a fine sight, since the dancers in their rehearsing are not thereby performing for an audience so much as for their own enjoyment—is it not a truism that for dancers as well as actors rehearsals can be a far more pleasurable experience than the official "performance(s)"? Why? Surely because at this time they are performing somewhere between "on" and "off" stage, an area of exciting and giddy fluidity—and in this scene we seem to meet the "ideal" situation in which the pleasure of the (female) dancers is only increased by the pleasure of the (male) onlookers, who do not remain onlookers for long as they are invited to join the dancers and dance with them, so that the conventional distinction between actor and audience, producer and consumer (no money is seen to change hands), melts away. Looking dissolves into participation.)

Lola leaves the cabaret with the sailor Frankie (whose name has a certain resonance: it brings to mind for me first of all Frenchy in *Destry Rides Again*—even though Frenchy is played by a woman—Marlene Dietrich—who happens to be German and who also happens to play the "original" Lola (Lola Lola—the repetition rendering the name more hypnotic) of *The Blue Angel*; not forgetting also that Frankie is

American, although he is attractive to Lola because he resembles Michel, who is actually French—even though symbolically associated with Gary Cooper—and who nearly ran Frankie over in the film's opening scene!). As she leaves she puts on a coat over her basque costume—something which is to happen at other times in the film and which "enacts" one of its main themes—themes which cannot be separated from their narrative enactment, and so may ironically be lost on us as we view the film, at least for the first time (although I am quite sure that we are aware that we are watching something a little more "rich and strange" than a straightforward piece of "escapist entertainment" when we do watch *Lola* for the first time).

Does the coat signify Lola's artificial covering over her real essence, even though the clothes that are closest to her body are a *costume* designed to conceal her identity, the costume that she wears as *Lola*, which is her *stage name* only? The complexity of the moment is extended as we move outside to the "real world" of the street, where Lola pauses briefly to admire the pictures of herself on the posters advertising the cabaret. At this point she constitutes her own audience and it would probably not be easy to describe her feelings (although they seem good—she seems to be accepting herself as an image, as others see her, and we might speculate here on Anouk Aimée's feelings as she sees herself in *Lola*—presumably they were good, as she worked with Demy again—as Lola—in *The Model Shop*, in which she is transposed to the America she dreams about in *Lola*, and where the Hollywood "dream" is revealed as a tawdry spectacle)⁷. Lola's son is playing with a toy in the alley outside her furnished apartment. Frankie picks him up, saying "Come fly with me!", referencing the pervasive theme of travel in the film (both real and imaginary: in this one little moment the two apparently opposed states are actually fused, as the young Yvan is held up in the air). The apartment, though already "furnished", is filled with objects which suggest the themes of the film and which are appropriate to Lola's life: there is a screen next to Lola's bed, there appear to be at least three mirrors, and a classical bust is positioned on the mantelpiece in front of the main mirror. The scene cuts as Lola and Frankie are about to make love.

By cutting at this point Demy is merely following cinematic convention, at least of that time. Scenes of sex—like scenes of extreme violence or death—can be highly problematic when *shown* in a film, as a viewer tends to become alienated from the fiction (even though such scenes, when they occur in contemporary cinema, may often not be designed to produce that effect). There may be an irony at work here, since although Lola is probably an object of desire for the men in the audience (at least) she is also—obviously—unattainable, since she exists only in the film (she is—and is not—Anouk Aimée). There is an analogy to be made between Frankie's—and more especially Roland's—desire for Lola and Lola's desire for Michel (which is temporarily displaced onto Frankie because he resembles Michel), as we come to realize that "sex objects" are always themselves "sex subjects", individuals with their own dreams and desires even if they may make their living as paid embodiments of our (that is, an audience's) dreams and desires. This complex "merry-go-round" idea of desire as an endless process—which may bring

to mind Max Ophuls' reflexive (though relatively more conventional) treatment of the subject in *LA RONDE*—is also adumbrated in the following scene, which serves to introduce the last main narrative strand of *Lola*. The young Cecile is looking at something in a shop window. On the edge of the pavement, a little distance away, a middle-aged man with a beret is looking at Cecile, evidently interested in her. Presumably Cecile can see his reflection in the shop window, because she abruptly turns round and sticks out her tongue at him. It is an indefinable moment, strange, disturbing, touching. It is as if young Cecile is presented to us for the first time in the film at the moment when she becomes aware of herself—through being looked at in this way by someone else—as an object of desire. The moment is both threatening and liberating. Threatening because she may stand in danger of being abducted or assaulted by a much older man, yet liberating because the realization that she is an object of someone else's desire gives her the strength to stick out her tongue and affirm herself as an adult subject (it is the day before her fourteenth birthday). As in the cabaret, the scene is performed yet appears spontaneous. Instead of the dancers unconsciously enjoying their rehearsing, here a young actress seems to be enjoying her first moments in front of a film camera and—as is famously the case with many child actors—the distinction between performance and behaviour is not easy to make⁸. One may be reminded of Jean Rouch's experiments with *cinema vérité*: that the act of placing a camera in front of someone may provoke that person to a presentation of themselves that they would not otherwise have realized. In this way the middle-aged man with the beret acts as a sort of camera for Cecile (of course the camera also would have been part of the scene as it was shot, but appears "off camera", as it were). Young Cecile is playful—and for children the either/or choices between work and play, being and appearing, are less easy to make than they seem to be for many adults (or are they?). Her identity is bound up with being playful (just as Lola's son Yvan is first seen playing with a toy in the alleyway, though he is only half Cecile's age). Of course, what this initial scene does is to presage what happens when Cecile meets Frankie and falls in love with him (apparently). This later narrative development is also referred to, or rather presaged, in the following scene in the bookshop, when Cecile's mother reprimands the assistant for recommending her the Marquis de Sade's *JUSTINE*, whose eponymous heroine is, she says, "so silly". While *JUSTINE* is a "disgrace", the other book, a whodunnit, was spoiled for her by someone having "written the murderer's name on page 13" (in other words, about as far through the book as we are through the film of *Lola*, though its pleasures and our involvement with it are somewhat more complex than with a whodunnit, which is read merely for its "solution" at the end: a form of "escapist entertainment" with scientific pretensions). The bookshop assistant apologizes: "I'm very sorry. I hardly know what to recommend to you today." At this point Roland walks into the shop and makes the acquaintance of Cecile and her mother. He offers to give them his dictionary (for Cecile, who is learning English) and remarks on Cecile's resemblance to a childhood friend of the same name: "The resemblance is so close, I felt I had been taken back fifteen years." Dictionaries translate



words into other words; dramatic films translate people into other people (it's called "acting", commonly defined in opposition to "being"—but *Lola* breaks down this opposition; Shakespeare, of course, is full of references to people having been "translated"); now Roland feels as if his first love, Cecile—who is also Lola, though we do not know this yet—has, by some magic non-translation, stayed the same age as she was when he used to know her. Perhaps it is this moment in the film which makes Roland's falling in love (again—cf. *The Blue Angel*; falling in love being a common occurrence in films, of course) with Cecile/Lola inevitable when he meets her by chance (cf. the surrealist concept of "significant chance") in the Passage Pommeraye (a surreal location *par*



Lola: Frankie/Alan Scott and Lola

excellence, which is now taunted in the tourist guide to Nantes as a place to visit because it is the setting of the film *Lola*, fiction having enhanced, or enlarged, fact, even if the "fact" is that the appeal of the Passage Pommeraye was always its "fictional" or "theatrical" appearance; as well as being significant in Demy's childhood as the place where, by virtue of its cinema club, he was introduced to and fell in love with cinema). In the following scene we see Lola looking at herself in front of a mirror dressed in a sailor outfit and saying to Frankie that she looks "terrible". Frankie disagrees—to him she looks beautiful. (Can they both be right?). She stands by the window, her face and hair illuminated by the sunlight, and tells Frankie: "It's incredible how much like him you look." She is

referring to Michel: and it's true—Frankie does look like a younger version of Michel, just as, for Roland, Cecile looks like Cecile/Lola as she was fifteen years previously. What we must recognize by now is the inescapable power which appearances exert upon everything. Film, obviously, concerns itself with appearances, with the way things and people *look*. How they look to each other, how they look to themselves, and, we could add, how they look to an audience. If we have not noticed it before, this scene between Lola and *Frankie* clinches the importance of the subject. Lola puts on her coat again, preparing to go out, and notices Frankie looking at her.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" she asks. "No reason. Just looking", he replies. Again, we can see this as a

moment of reflexivity in the film, one that does not break the spell of the illusion but which, on the contrary, may add to it, lending it greater depth like a mirror image reflected in a further mirror. It could be said at this moment that Lola does look (and is?) "divine", and for this reason it is enough to look at her and wonder at her (image holding up narrative, as well as precipitating it—at least if we presume that narrative is caused by desire). At the same time she has been looking at Frankie and wondering at his resemblance to Michel, who, in her "mind's eye", looks (and is?) divine. This religious idea could be followed through by drawing upon the Christian idea of the "Second Coming", something which may gain weight from the three references in the film to "three days": the duration of Roland's job, the number of days Lola has been back in town when she meets Roland, the number of days Michel has been in town by the time he is reunited with Lola; the duration of "fictional time" in the film is also three days, the three days that signified the interval between Christ's death and resurrection (just as it could be suggested, without appearing blasphemous, that the compressed time of the 85 minute "interval" during which we watch the film in the cinema—what Hitchcock called "life with the boring bits cut out"—corresponds to a temporary death; also we could note that Lola conceives on Whitsunday, the day commemorating the descent of the Holy Spirit).

What I hope to have suggested in the foregoing discussion is that *Lola* is breaking down (or at least making semi-permeable) the normal boundaries between life and art. It is not set in some "never-never land" but in the real town of Nantes: nevertheless, during the course of the film this setting and some of the people in it become invested—or invest themselves—with meaning. They become enchanted, and we (the audience) are enchanted by them, though the enchantment may also turn to disenchantment. In this sense the experience of the film may be substituting for what used to be a religious (and what was before that—originally—a ritual) experience.

In the following scene in the cafe Roland says that he had gone to see the "Gary Cooper film" that afternoon, in which "the people seemed happy". "Where?" the proprietress asks him. "The Katorza". "The setting, not the cinema", she retorts. "Matareva", he says. "It's an island in the Pacific, near Tahiti". "Life's always nice in films", she says. "Life's the same everywhere", Michel's mother answers in disagreement (she is disappointed because her dream appears to have been inaccurate: Michel has not arrived—yet he has). "People here don't know what living means", Roland says, as if at some level aware of the need to connect the two worlds of "life" and "art" in order to revive them both, or perhaps just frustrated at the contrast between life in the film he has just seen and real life as it is for him in the present: "I have no *oeuvre* to create", he continues. In lieu of being an artist, the options would seem to be boredom or parenthood (in which one is too busy to realize one is bored)⁹. At this point Jeanne tells him about "Monsieur Valentin in Passage Pommeraye", which inaugurates the film-within-a-film subplot of Roland's employment as an unlikely diamond smuggler. It is at this surrealist location not only that he meets Monsieur Valentin (whose "front" is a hairdressing-cum-shoe shop—one is

reminded of numerous similar "fronts" in various Hitchcock thrillers), but that he literally "bumps into" Lola, whom he knows as Cecile, and which automatically brings us up short when he addresses her as such in response to her question: "Roland, don't you recognize me?" While they talk, her son gets bored and goes up to one of the mirrors in the arcade and looks at himself (it is impossible to count the number of times mirrors appear in scenes in *Lola*: their use may bring to mind Cocteau's *Orphée*—Demy had already adapted Cocteau in a short film, *Le bel indifferent*—in which, near the beginning of the film, a mirror smashes for no reason except as if to say that the film-maker/magician can still (re-)enchant us even when he smashes the cinematic illusion; and, a little later, Orpheus feels around the mirror which fills the camera frame and tries unsuccessfully to penetrate it—though later he is successful, glass becomes liquid and he enters the "other world" of death: these elements being no doubt influential to Demy, as well as to Bergman in his celebrated prologue to *Persona*, in which the reflexivity is more obvious but perhaps less impressive for that same reason). Lola runs after Yvan to bring him back, then remarks to Roland that she is running late: "I've not had time to change my costume" (does she still have on the sailor outfit under her coat?). They agree to meet later that evening "in front of the theatre". She rushes off. Roland enters M. Valentin's shop and the music abruptly modulates to let us know we have surely entered the film world of crime and espionage thrillers. The assistant withdraws to the back of the shop and draws back a curtain, from which M. Valentin himself, dressed in white (somewhat like an older version of Michel) appears immediately, as if he has been waiting for his cue to make his grand entrance.

He ushers Roland into a back room filled with mirrors and photographs, where he hands him a briefcase and briefs him about his mission. For the job he will need to assume a new identity (that of "Jean Maillard"—in reality a 16th century composer about whom nothing is known) and passport ("Insert your photograph", he is told). Roland is excited: "It's a real fairy-tale!", he says. M. Valentin remains impassive. "One last thing", he tells Roland as he is about to leave, "I don't know you. You don't know me." It is the cliché of countless crime thrillers, one which here reflects back on the film we are watching on either side of it (this scene presenting itself as a kind of parenthesis in the film), in which "knowledge" of people is revealed as a far more problematic concept than in the conventional "escapist" entertainment.

We cut to young Cecile and her mother returning to their apartment. Cecile puts on some ballet music and starts to dance (she is indeed a young equivalent of her namesake), while her mother remarks that "one must sometimes take people on trust. Appearances can be deceptive. The cowl does not make the monk"¹⁰. But Cecile has not heard her, only we—the audience—have done so (and it is an important point to take in; except we must also remember that appearances can be real at the same time as being deceptive: how can we identify a monk without his cowl?); for Cecile has quickly moved outside onto the balcony and is now knocking on the balcony window asking to be let in. Appearances can indeed be deceptive, and quickly changing: her mother had thought she had been talking to her in the next room (but

perhaps she has been talking to herself as much as to Cecile all along! She then quickly changes herself as she fusses about in front of the bedroom mirror: "I can't receive him like this!" she gasps in desperation at her appearance as the doorbell rings. It is a false alarm: it is only Suzanne, Cecile's schoolfriend. But only a moment later Roland indeed arrives, bringing the dictionary, as if to prove the case that "life is movement".

Roland talks to the mother and daughter about his parents, setting up a familiar dichotomy between male and female roles ("man the wanderer", "woman the homemaker"), with the notion of travel perhaps providing a metaphor for cinema (in which case it might constitute a possible solution, or compromise, to the incompatibility: cinema as a metaphorical travel which could be enjoyed equally by men and by women?). As if on cue, Roland rises to leave—he has got to meet someone (even though he has only just arrived), and in a couple of days he will be "on the high seas, somewhere off Cherbourg" (a fusion of the exotic and the local which thereby mocks itself in a most healthy manner, although Roland is unaware of it: the fact that he says this in front of a mirror adds to the reflexive effect). Cecile runs off to bring back a photograph of her mother dressed as a dancer; she is embarrassed, saying it is "only fancy dress", but providing yet another link between the characters of the film, and displaying the fact that all of us live by illusions (Cecile's mother is embarrassed by the photo because she wishes to present herself as a respectable middle-class woman: but the fact that she has to "present" herself as this—in other words, it is not something "natural" to her—only goes to show that middle-class respectability is just as much an illusion as the world of cabaret dancing: more so, in fact, since cabaret dancers *acknowledge* the power of illusion in life, whereas "respectable" people frown upon it, unless it is given a suitably respectable artistic "front"). The moment is already complex enough without our necessarily having to be aware of the cinematic reference here to Bresson's *Les dames du Bois de Boulogne*, from which the photograph is a still, and in which Elina Labourdette, the actress playing Madame Desnoyer, played a cabaret dancer rather like Lola (additionally, Bresson's film was adapted—by Cocteau—from Diderot's "Madame de la Pommeraye", a "tale within a tale" (within his novel *Jacques le fataliste*), which concerns itself with deception and masquerade). This knowledge certainly helps to make the moment more resonant; but the moment is still effective without our being aware of the *hommage* (in other words it is integrated with the themes of the film as a whole); in contrast to the moment in the cafe when Roland refers to his only friend "Poiccard" having been shot by the police (a reference to "Michel Poiccard", the protagonist of Godard's *A bout de souffle*, made the previous year, who identifies himself with Humphrey Bogart): here, unfortunately, one tends to feel the *hommage* is an indulgence, since the remark does not seem to have any integral purpose and since by his tone I think we can tell (although I may be wrong, not being a native of France) that Roland is not consciously making a sardonic comment to Claire, who in any case does not register when she hears it (and she seems to be a keen filmgoer). (On the other hand, at least the reference

is hidden in a piece of "throwaway" dialogue so that it is hardly jarring on a first viewing.)¹¹

There is no space here to give to each scene of the film the attention it deserves. Instead I shall focus on three scenes in which the film medium itself becomes more than usually the subject for our contemplation as well as remaining the object of our absorption: Lola's rehearsal at the cabaret; young Cecile's visit to the carnival with Frankie; and Michel's arrival at the cabaret to take Lola away.

At the "Eldorado" there seems to be no clearcut distinction between the stage and the audience; there seems to be a raised platform at the back of the room, but Lola and the dancers are never seen performing on it. As mentioned earlier, the obvious reason for this is that we never actually see them give a proper performance for an audience in the film. The dancers rehearse, and then invite the sailors to dance with them (something mirrored at the end of the film, when a new group of sailors arrives); while Lola rehearses in front of the other dancers (who are mainly busy making themselves up rather than paying too much attention to her). She prefaces her rehearsal by admiring a fellow dancer's costume, thinking it is new ("That's nice. Where did you find it?"). The dancer replies: "It's my old black, made over." What is true of one's clothes may also be true of one's identity, though identity is conventionally regarded as something unique and unchanging and unavailable to others except perhaps in the intimacies of love. Lola remarks that she would like to do things to her costume, including "having a plume like Marilyn Monroe" (the "like" affirming a resemblance rather than an identity, as with the resemblance to Marlene Dietrich which she is about to enact), adding "but I never have the time", as if to assure us that this is life, not the movies. At this point the music starts and Lola breaks into her theme song: "C'est moi, c'est Lola." For the first verse she does not look at the camera, and the dancers around her provide her only audience. By the time of the second verse we might guess that this song is actually describing her "real life" role as an entertainer ("the girl who sees that here's a boat, and sailors tired of life afloat"), and it is also at this point that she dons a top hat (which, by virtue of a cut from long shot to close up as her head is turned away from us, seems to appear from nowhere as if by magic), the object that should remind some filmgoers that this scene is a kind of re-enactment of what is probably the most memorable scene in *The Blue Angel*, the film which made Marlene Dietrich a star and in which she played the part of Lola-Lola (although that scene was a "real" performance rather than a rehearsal, and, it being 1930 rather than 1960, and cinema not yet old enough to contain its own history, Dietrich was not making reference to any earlier film stars: while it is possible that this scene in *Lola* did much to make Anouk Aimée a star, though of a lower magnitude than Monroe or Dietrich—it features on the cover of the VHS and DVD releases in the U.S. and the U.K.). It is also at this point that Lola looks straight at the camera for the first time, as if addressing us directly (we are implicitly likened to the tired sailors). In the final verse she throws the hat aside and refers to her "crazy hope that burns inside", her obsession with "one man alone, a love of old" (Michel, of course). Rather like the "in between" state of rehearsal itself (to which we are



made privileged witnesses), through her song here Lola reminds us that she is both an object of desire (playing to the camera) and an independent subject with her own desires (with Michel—at least—as their object)¹². By consciously presenting herself to us as a fantasy (something that is strengthened by the Dietrich reference and the throwing away of the hat as well as by the alternation of direct address to the camera with illusionistic performing, and the very abrupt return to earth by her question—“What time is it?”—as soon as she

has finished the song), she successfully undermines, or mocks, her seductive effect, something which is also achieved by referring to her own “crazy hope”, or fantasy, of Michel. In other words the cinematic illusion is undermined, yet paradoxically strengthened as we are reminded of the power of illusion in life in general. We “identify” with Lola here, I would argue (whether we are male or female), as we become aware—within the fiction—that we are subject to the same sort of desires and fantasies as she is. There are many dangers



The Model Shop: Lola/Cecile and George/Gary Lockwood

in doing this, of course, most notably perhaps the danger of falling into a fixed pattern of being which gains its own identity (or "authorization"—Bruce Wilshire's term) from an external "other" (whether secular or religious, individual or social). By being a performer we might assume that Lola is less susceptible to romantic love than most (bearing in mind the long-time association of cabaret dancers—and actresses—with prostitutes, present in *Lola* in the first lines which Frankie says to her: "I'd like to sleep with you again, Lola."),

but this in no way follows. Lola does not seem to be fully aware (though she is partly aware, as evidenced by her surprise when Roland refers to her by her "real" name of Cecile rather than as Lola: Michel is to do the same thing later) that, far from hiding herself in her work at the cabaret (*this* cabaret, anyway, which seems to be somewhat special), pretending to be someone other than she really is, she is actually expressing herself, her "self" being nothing less than the human capacity for transformation. It is this difference between her own view of herself (as bound up with Michel) and our view of her (as bound up with her life as a dancer and all the people around her, Michel being for most of the film a mere shadowy presence) that makes the "fairy-tale" ending of the film—when Lola leaves the "Eldorado" for a seemingly more fixed identity as Michel's wife—so equivocal in its effect.

When Lola meets Roland outside the theatre (which, with its pillars, appears extraordinarily like a church, or temple, as if to make us aware of the common origins of drama and religion in ritual; and on this occasion, unlike for his job, Roland is punctual) and they go to a restaurant, she tells him about the time when she first met Michel: "It was...during Carnival. There was a fair too... you know, with a merry-go-round." Michel was "huge, fair-haired...He was in American sailor costume, white like a pierrot, with a cap. It was my fourteenth birthday. I fell in love with him there and then." The irony should not be lost on us: Lola falls in love with Michel when he is not himself; in fact, she refers to him as being in a double disguise or, rather, in another deepening of illusion, his actual costume reminds her of another costume (translating between America and France: while Frankie is "really" American, he is only a poor substitute for the man who captures Lola's heart when he pretends to be American!). Michel as an "essence" is inseparable in her mind from the images of illusion: his costume, the fair and merry-go-round (which may induce dizziness, a distortion—or is it enlargement?—of perception) and the carnival itself, which may be defined as the closest contemporary equivalent of ritual, in which society brings itself into being and periodically confirms itself through the collective acting out of a fiction which has ultimately an economic aim (a pantomime acted out by disguised females to persuade male hunters to bring back fresh meat to hungry women and children; as the word may suggest, with its literal meaning of "farewell to meat"—*carné vole*—while today that original economic aspect is forgotten about).¹³

Lola's indelible memories of the carnival are subtly commented upon by her image being reflected in the mirror behind her as she talks, but (in keeping with the doubleness announced in the film's epigraph) this ironic distancing is combined with involvement and sympathy (we might also bear in mind that "reflections" can mean "memories", and mirroring may imply a reality that is displaced in time as well as space). The film itself is in love with the illusions it is usually obliquely also making us aware of as illusions. When young Cecile goes on her fourteenth birthday to the fair with Frankie (the American sailor with the French-sounding name), Lola's indelible memories are enacted before us—and become young Cecile's indelible memories (the next day she is to run away to follow Frankie to Cherbourg), and also, per-

haps, our indelible memories. For this sequence becomes the most memorable in the film through a reflexive technique which only deepens our involvement with illusion.

The sequence may be said to begin with the sound of a trumpet, which may bring to mind the trumpet that both Roland and Frankie have just bought for Yvan (he had asked for one as a replacement for his broken toy; and is thus involved with the world of creative expression—which is also a kind of illusion—just as is young Cecile, who loves the fair and who wants more than anything to be a dancer). The trumpet here sounds the end of the bumper car ride. A group of people get out; a new group get in. Frankie and Cecile take one of the cars and the ride begins; but from now on the diegetic sounds die away and are replaced by a Bach fugue which exerts an emotional power which allows us to experience something like the emotions which are being experienced by Cecile at this moment. We notice that the fair divides itself into actors and audience, as Frankie sees his group of sailor friends waving to him from the margins of the enclosure: there are shots both from the spectators' and Frankie and Cecile's point of view, making us (the cinema audience) both inside and outside the experience at the same time. The ride ends, the trumpet sounds again, and Frankie and Cecile run on to the merry-go-round, which provides a deeper sense of enclosure (though again with people looking on). The seats of the merry-go-round have removable covers, which are utilised as the contraption accelerates in speed (again, as with the bumper cars, the theme of travel is incidentally introduced, it here being not literal, but imaginative, travel, which matters—one may be reminded of the train which goes nowhere but is full of pictures in Ophuls' *Letter From An Unknown Woman*; and of course one may be reminded too of a cinema audience watching a film). We see Cecile's face change its expression to one of rapture as she looks ahead of her as the light fades and the covers are pulled over (so that, from the outside, the merry-go-round assumes the appearance of a snake, perhaps being connected in our minds with traditional Chinese New Year celebrations). This may be the "decisive moment" when she falls in love with Frankie: but the sequence itself shows that if Cecile falls in love here she falls in love with the whole experience. Frankie is inseparable from the illusion which has overwhelmed her in its force and intensity. After the merry-go-round is over, we experience (to the accompaniment of Bach's "Ave Maria", whose religious connotations are, I would claim, thoroughly justified in this context) the extraordinary slow motion sequence which mirrors the consciousness of Cecile at this moment, her mind full of the "after-images" of what has just occurred to her (I use the word "experience" rather than "witness" here to suggest that we are somehow truly "with" Cecile at this moment, sharing her rapture—and Demy succeeds in making us do this by the transparently obvious reflexive technique of slow motion—which effectively moves us deeper into the world of illusion rather than away from it, as it might be expected to do—though I am not suggesting that we are oblivious to the fact that the film has adopted a slow motion effect at this point). Although the physical experience of the ride is over, its effects are not: the slow motion effect continues until Frankie and Cecile are almost at the edges of the fair-

ground. When they stop and talk their words are heard without any other sounds, even though there is lots of activity going on around them. Cecile speaks in a deliberately slow and theatrical way, as if somehow aware that this moment is important for her; she also breaks into English with "Goodbye, Frankie!"

Although the background sounds are deliberately cut out, it is interesting to note that the people behind Frankie and Cecile are assembled as spectators, watching a fairground act involving hoops, but—symbolically at least—they are acting as witnesses to a dramatic climax of the film in a way which might bring to mind, if only by contrast, the chorus in Greek tragedy—who served as crucial mediators between the theatrical illusion and the audience of the play (a similar effect is to be achieved in the scene when Michel enters the cabaret—see below). The fact, however, that this chorus is not truly aware of what is being played out in front of it (they are looking in another direction), points to the difference between the contemporary world, where intense emotion is generally confined to the intimacies of love (and where romantic love is most often defined in opposition to society), and ancient times, when intense emotion was generated (primarily in ritual) in conjunction with the social world.

When Michel enters the cafe the scene is filmed as if he is entering "our" world, the world of the cinema audience. The black of the cafe interior contrasts sharply with the dazzling white outside: the sunlight, the cadillac, Michel's white clothes. The open door through which he enters marks a boundary being crossed over (and may bring to mind, in contrast, the ending of *The Searchers*, in which the "star" walks out of the door away from us). The two women in the cafe are suitably "starstruck": one of them, his mother, faints. He tells her he has come back to find Lola, his lost love, and their child. He leaves to go to the cabaret, and Roland almost brushes past him as he enters the cafe to say goodbye. In contrast to Michel, however, Roland is dressed in grey, so that his arrival does not make a big visual impact. He speaks melodramatically, however, saying, as if quoting a line from a film (is he?) that he will "never come back to France." Just as the door comprises a "frame-within-a-frame" in the cafe scene here (during the course of the film another has been provided by the window of Roland's room), the curtained doorway to the "Eldorado" assumes the same role in the following scene, first of all when Lola enters with Yvan and a suitcase to say goodbye to the dancers; and then, shortly afterwards, when Michel stands still in the doorway, waiting for Lola to turn and acknowledge him, which she does with an astonished look and the word "Michel!" As the lovers are finally reunited after their seven year separation (this folk-tale element, together with the importance of the sea as a setting for Lola and Michel's romance may here recall the endings of Shakespeare's last plays, in which illusion and reality come together), the dancers/actors now stand in for us as an audience to this recognition scene, and there is not a dry eye left in the house. Michel tells Lola (whom he knows only as Cecile) that he has been "stranded penniless on an island 20,000 kilometres away. At Matareva, in the Pacific...Now I've been back for three days", and the film world and the real world become quite confounded. The couple speak in pro-

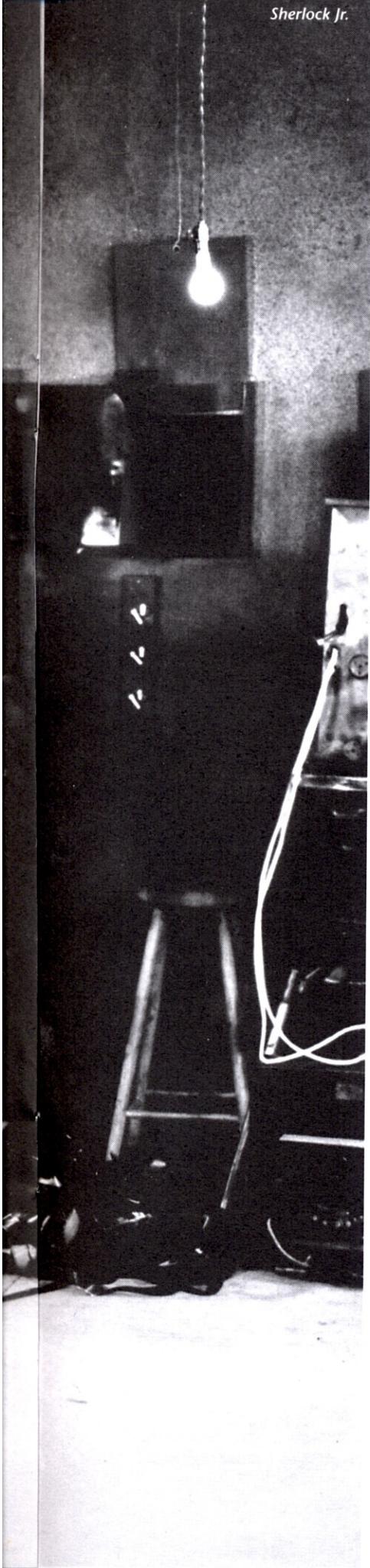
nounced dramatic tones which heighten the (already strong) sense of fictionality of the scene. If Michel is now unconsciously standing in for Gary Cooper (he exists almost wholly as a symbol for us, something reinforced by the use of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony which accompanies him, just as he has existed as a symbol for Lola—she has admitted to Roland that she hardly knew him), we may remember that Lola has stood in more consciously for Marlene Dietrich (making her both individual and symbol, subject as well as object); there, the idealization was mocked; here, it is surrendered to. Except...as Lola/Cecile and Yvan drive off with Michel in his gleaming white cadillac, into the sunset (but where are they really going? They actually seem to be driving into the city centre, presumably to settle down into a life of domestic bliss), we see Roland walk towards the camera on his way to board his boat. Lola sees him and turns her head around, looking back (toward the camera). An expression of sadness and regret passes over her face, before she turns to Michel and smiles, and the iris which opened at the beginning of the film closes to mark its end (the ever decreasing "0" of remaining light being verbally matched by the last word of the film, said by Lola: "Nothing"). We may, I think, assume that now a new process of idealization may be taking place in Lola's mind, with the absent Roland (who is about to embark on a trip to the other side of the world) displacing the now present Michel.¹⁴

In *Lola*, the "happy ever after" endings of fairy-tales (and Hollywood narrative cinema) are both affirmed and presented as something to be regretted. As Lola herself has said earlier to Roland: "All I want is for things to turn out right, with everyone happy ever after." She does not notice the possible contradiction between "happy ever after" and "everyone", since traditionally the "happy ever after" is reserved for the "happy couple" alone. This pre-eminent desire for an "ending", probably induced subconsciously into most westerners by their Judaic-Christian heritage, in which the world is shaped by a linear story ending in Apocalypse (or the "Second Coming" alluded to earlier), may be viewed as something aberrant (as well as abhorrent), since "life is movement": movement, and the energies that accompany it, can end only in death. By turning away (albeit temporarily) from the destiny facing her to face the other way, Lola is resisting the "happy ending" which she consciously desires, as if also aware that no "ending" can ever be happy. It is surely no accident that for Demy *Lola* was intended not to be the end of the story, only the beginning, his idea being "to make fifty films which will be linked together and which will mutually illuminate each other's meaning through shared characters."¹⁵ Of course, the plan was never fully realized; but could we ever have expected it to be otherwise?

NOTES

- 1 Bruce Wilshire, *Role Playing and Identity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1982), 105. Although it is primarily a phenomenological study of theatre, I have found Wilshire's book to be very pertinent to *Lola* and am much indebted to it in this essay.
- 2 See Anne Righter (Barton): *Shakespeare and the Idea of the Play* (London: Chatto and Windus 1962).
- 3 Wilshire, 218.
- 4 We are to find out later that he has come from Matareva, an example of a real place which sounds fictitious (so that at least one critic has assumed that it is actually fictitious). One can see how it appealed to Demy, especially since in French it could be regarded as a play on words: Matareva/meta-reve (this resemblance was noted by Raymond Durgnat in *Nouvelle Vague: The First Decade* (Loughton: Motion Publications 1963), 24).
- 5 Although this resemblance is actually slighter than it may seem at first sight, being visual rather than thematic. Thematically, in its use of a female protagonist and foregrounding of decor to enact its themes, *Lola* has far more in common with the musical melodramas of Vincente Minnelli, for example *The Pirate*, which makes great play with the notions of illusion and reality via performance. Demy originally planned *Lola* as a musical (in colour) but lacked the funds to make one until *Les parapluies de Cherbourg*.
- 6 In fact, the most likely possibility is that Frankie has visited the cabaret already on his own, and is now introducing his fellow sailors to it for the first time. But this explanation is not definitive: it does not rule out other possibilities.
- 7 Anouk Aimée speaks—almost as if she is still in the role—with great affection of her character and the film nearly 35 years later in Agnes Varda's documentary, *The World of Jacques Demy* (1995): "Lola is such a part of me. I can't tell which part's her or which is me. We've grown so close, we mimic each other."
- 8 In *The World of Jacques Demy* we discover that certain scenes in the film corresponded to events in her real life at that time: "I really was fourteen. The day we shot the birthday scene was my real birthday!"
- 9 In his bitter frustration with the life—or the absence of it—around him, Roland bears similarities to the protagonist of Walker Percy's novel *The Moviegoer*, published the year before *Lola* was released, who complains about the "everydayness" of things and is in love with the movies because they seem to re-enchant everything (though, acting like a drug, leaving him often more depressed afterwards)—and when William Holden is seen in town it is as if life is suddenly quickened all around him. Percy's novel is darker than Demy's film, and looks forward to our time of "reality TV" where, it seems, many people do not feel alive at all unless a camera is pointing at them.
- 10 The DVD release changes the phrase to "clothes don't make the man", which may be more accurate (I am not sure) but which means a loss in complexity; in their modernizations and simplifications the DVD subtitles are generally to be regretted in comparison with those of the earlier VHS release.
- 11 In his monograph Durgnat gives a short list of other films which *Lola* may remind us of: *Bus Stop*, *Bob le flambeur*, *Quai des brumes*, *Le crime de Monsieur Lange* (Durgnat, 24). I could also add Renoir's *The Golden Coach*, with its interweaving themes of theatre and life, and the common feature of a female protagonist loved by three different men. These references, or echoes, serve to make *Lola* more strangely familiar to us when we view it, which makes it more life-like. As Durgnat remarks: "But the fact that (these) references never "define" a scene asserts an opposite attitude; life recalls art, but remains itself; yet life itself is a feeling of *deja vu*, of fond clichés, which, in turn, have a mild fatalism." (Durgnat, 24). Regarding the reference to *A bout de souffle*: Demy may have felt obliged to make it out of appreciation for Jean-Luc Godard's support in the production of *Lola*. Interestingly, the reference is cut from the DVD release.
- 12 Astonishingly, the original trailer, included on the DVD release, appears to offer an opposed reading of the last verse of Lola's song to the one given within the film: it suggests—both visually and in the subtitles—that Lola is the chooser rather than the chosen, the repeated "Toi! Toi! Toi!" referring to Michel, Frankie and Roland (between whom she suspends choice, or, it is implied, perhaps chooses all three) rather than to Lola herself (as the willing object of Michel's desire). I do not know if the original French can accommodate both readings, but the apparent anomaly is indicative of *Lola's* "in between" status as both subject and object.
- 13 I am here drawing on the theory of cultural origins outlined by Chris Knight in his book *Blood Relations* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press 1991).
- 14 In *The Model Shop*, made seven years later, we find out that Lola went to America with Michel, where they got a divorce after Michel left her for Jackie (Jeanne Moreau, from *La baie des anges*); in the photo album which she produces, we see that she has kept pages for Frankie (who has died in Vietnam) and Roland as well as for Michel and Yvan.
- 15 Quoted in *French Cinema Since 1946: Volume Two—The Personal Style* by Roy Armes (London: Tantivy Press and New York: A.S. Barnes & Co. 1970), 184.





FILM, DREAMS and STOLEN POCKETWATCHES

BY DR. IRA NAYMAN

Cinematic reference is everywhere these days. You can see it in films from *Airplane* to *Scary Movie*, from Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill* to Stephen Chow's *Kung Fu Hustle*. For several seasons, *The Simpsons* was full of it; *The Family Guy* has, to some extent, currently taken over. When it works, it adds to our enjoyment of a film by flattering us that we are as knowledgeable about film as the people who make these films or TV series. When it doesn't work, it alienates audience members by making us feel we are hearing a joke we don't get. It usually works, though, as the filmmakers and television producers mix in enough originality and keep up such a fast pace that there is enough to entertain an audience that didn't spend its formative years working in a video store and, thus, doesn't get some of the more obscure references.

The Zucker and Wayans' films are parodies, which mix both affection and contempt for the films they reference. Tarantino and Chow make films that are homages to the films they admire. Despite all of this cinematic referencing, none of these filmmakers explores film as a medium. They are working in a genre I have referred to as "postmodernism for idiots:" unlike true postmodern referentiality, they celebrate rather than deconstruct the medium.¹

However, there have, since almost the beginning of the medium, been films that explore film as a medium and as an industry. Examples of the latter are *Sunset Boulevard*, with its caustic analysis of those who were left behind by the switch from silent to sound film, and *The Player*, which explored the politics of filmmaking in Hollywood. An example of the former is Buster Keaton's classic silent film *Sherlock Jr.*

NOT YOUR GREAT GRANDPARENTS' SILENT MOVIE

Sherlock Jr. opens with a shot of Keaton reading a book on how to be a great detective. The title of Keaton's film, as well as the character of Sherlock Jr., the world's greatest detective, are, of course, references to Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, whose exploits in the 1910s and 1920s were extremely popular. It quickly becomes apparent that Keaton is **not** this character, however, when his boss at the movie theatre in which he works tells him to stop daydreaming about detectives and sweep out the theatre before the next show.

Keaton is in love with a woman whose father's pocket watch is stolen by Keaton's rival. Convinced that the book will help him be a great detective, Keaton

announces to everybody that he will solve the mystery. He is such a great detective, that Keaton ends up being framed for the crime, and skulks out of the house in shame. His attempts to determine if his rival is guilty end in similar ignominy. Not knowing what else to do, he returns to his day job in the theatre to start an afternoon screening.

While Keaton is at work, the woman he loves does a little detective work of her own and quickly discovers who the real culprit is. Thus, less than 15 minutes into the 45 minute film, we have the climax of the *Sherlock Jr.* (the revelation of the identity of the true villain), and the ostensible plot is over. Worse: the resolution does not come through the actions of the protagonist! (I imagine screenwriting gurus like Syd Field and Robert McKee having brain seizures at the thought.)

While some might see in this bad writing, I would suggest that the mystery of the stolen pocket watch is not the main purpose of *Sherlock Jr.*, that, in fact, it is only the set-up for what the film is really about: an exploration of the differences between the cinematic world and the real world. As Dardis points out, "the real subject of the film is film itself, or illusion."²

MASTER OF SPACE

When Keaton starts the film within the film in the movie theatre, he falls asleep in the projection booth. The film, *Diamonds and Pearls*, is about a master jewel thief who steals a valuable necklace from a wealthy man. Soon after the film starts, the jewel thief morphs into Keaton's rival in the real world, and the daughter of the man who owns the jewels morphs into Keaton's love interest. On the screen, the rival makes increasingly aggressive advances towards the woman. A ghost Keaton arises out of the sleeping Keaton's body and tries to wake him, but he will not budge. Outraged by what he sees on the screen, the ghost Keaton pulls his ghost hat off the peg in the booth and runs down into the theatre.

Keaton runs through the house and into the screen, where he pulls his rival away from his woman. The rival takes Keaton by the scruff of his neck and throws him out of the movie and back into the theatre. Rightly so: a real person doesn't belong on the silver screen. However, Keaton is not so easily daunted: he sidles up to the side of the screen and jumps back in when he thinks his rival isn't looking. Unexpectedly, Keaton jumps into the frame just as the film cuts to a scene in a different location. Just as he gets used to being in this new space, there is a cut to another location. This pattern (Keaton gets used to a scene, only to have it change around him) happens seven or eight times before he finds himself in front of the house, scratching his head, trying to understand how to negotiate this reality.

In this sequence, Keaton is setting up a three-pointed analogy. On the one hand, we have film reality which has its own logic. On the other hand, we have the real world, which has its own, quite different logic. Then, we have dream reality, which seems to be the bridge between the two, although I would argue that, in the end, dream reality has more in common with cinematic reality than the real world: as psychologist Charles Levin puts it, "film is a technological extension of the dream process..."³

In this opening sequence of the film within the film, we

are shown how space in the real world and in film are different. In the real world, space is continuous: to get from point A to point B, we have to traverse all of the points in between. In film, by way of contrast, a simple transition (ie: cut, fade, wipe, whatever) can take us from point A to point B without having to traverse the points in between. The humour in this sequence arises out of the fact that Keaton, having just entered the film world, applies his understanding of real world physics to it even though they no longer apply.

CHARACTER

After this sequence, there is a fade to black. We fade in on the posh house where the theft of the jewels is discovered and a detective sent for. After the bad guys reveal their villainy to each other, Keaton arrives to investigate the crime. This is not the Keaton from the real world, however: it is Sherlock Jr., the world's greatest detective. To make the transition, Keaton has abandoned his real world clothes, trading them in for the black tie, tails and cape of his new character. Conspicuously absent is the porkpie hat which, like Chaplin's cane and bowler, was Keaton's identifier throughout his major works. In his new guise, Keaton evades attempts on his life, saves the woman, recovers the stolen necklace and discovers the evildoers. He does, in fact, everything that he was not capable of doing in the real world. (Significantly, the first sequence of the film within the film is shot as a single long shot of the movie screen, including the audience watching it. At the end of this sequence, the camera closes in on the screen within the screen, until it fills the real screen; in this way, we actually enter the film world.)

According to Sigmund Freud, "a dream is a (disguised) fulfillment of a (suppressed or repressed) wish."⁴ For many of us, our wish is to be able to control our fate, to take our lives in hand and triumph against adversity. The contrast between Keaton's ineffectuality in his waking life and success in his dream/cinematic life points to one of the greatest pleasures we get out of movies: identification with a hero who has greater adventures than we do and triumphs against any adversary or adversity.

MASTER OF TIME

In the end, of course, we must all wake up. In *Sherlock Jr.*, Keaton wakes up in time to see the end of the movie within the movie. Remembering his own predicament, he appears glum, but, then, the woman appears and tells him everything is okay. Despite himself, he has a happy ending. Standing shyly with the woman in the projection booth, Keaton isn't sure what to do, so he looks at the movie he's projecting onto the screen.

The hero in the movie takes the woman (no longer Keaton's woman, having returned to the visage of the female actor in *Diamonds and Pearls*) by the hand. Keaton takes his woman by the hand. The hero in the movies pulls the woman closer to him. Keaton pulls his woman closer to him. The hero gives the woman a kiss. Keaton gives the woman a peck on the cheek. Onscreen, the image of the couple dissolves into a shot of the couple with a pair of children. Keaton scratches his head and wonders how they pulled that off!

In this sequence, Keaton is pointing out the difference between how time is portrayed in film and how we experience it in the real world, much like he has already explored the issue of space. To get from today to tomorrow, we have to live through all of the intervening moments in time. In film, however, a jump of years can be made by a simple transition. Again, the humour in the scene develops out of the expectations Keaton has from his experience of the real world misapplied to the cinematic world. And, again, film acts more like a dream than real life. "The fact that time and space are often thrown into confusion," Freud wrote in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, "does not affect the true content of the dream, since no doubt neither of them are of significance for its real essence."⁵

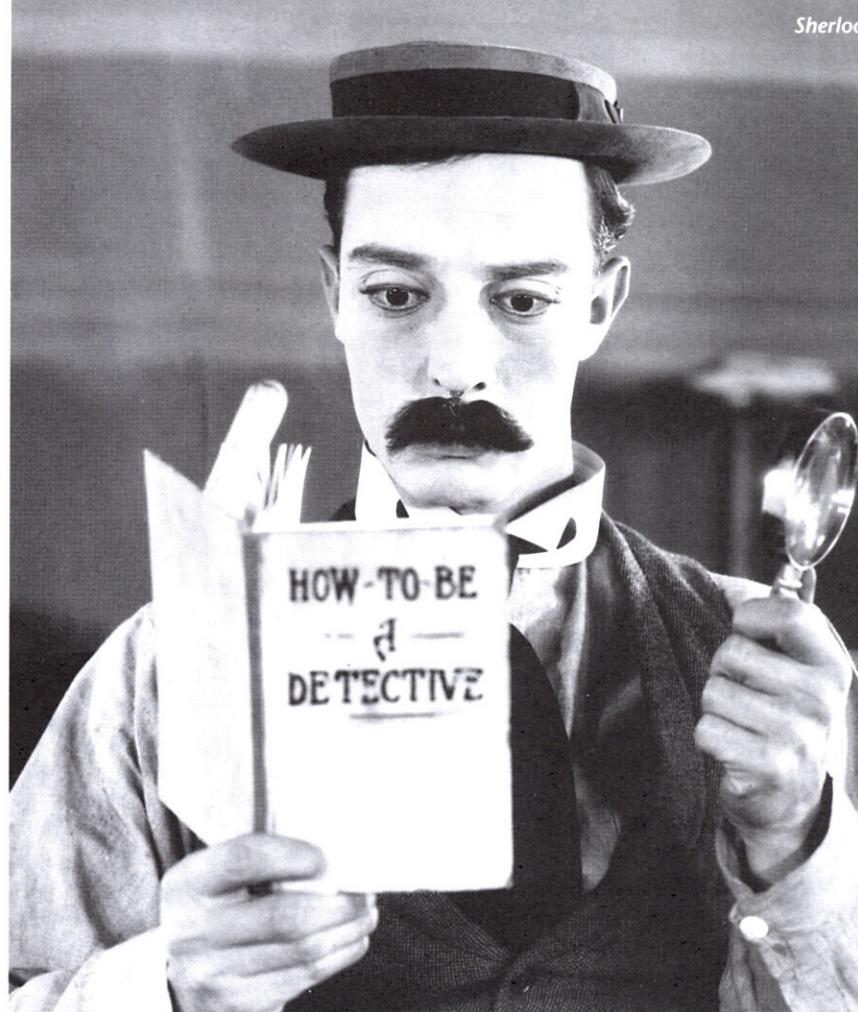
Around the time Keaton was making *Sherlock Jr.*, Russian film theorist and director Sergei Eisenstein was coming to similar conclusions about time and space in cinema. He argued that through the careful use of montage, one could connect events in different locations, as well as manipulate the timing of events (making them take longer on screen than they would in real life, or less time, or connecting events taking place at different times).⁶ There is no evidence that Keaton had been exposed to Eisenstein's ideas, or, for that matter, that he had a coherent theory of cinema of his own, as Kerr argues:

Buster Keaton...protested to the end of his days that he had no notion of what his admirers were talking about when they spoke, as Andrew Sarris did, of his 'cerebral' qualities, or when they detected a pervasive surrealism in his films that—considering the period in which his films were made—virtually placed him in the avant garde. "I was just trying to get laughs" was his constant and stubborn answer to questions. Keaton was, in fact, a brilliant analyst of film, as his dazzling film-within-a-film in *Sherlock Jr.* plainly indicates: the sequence illustrates basic theories of continuity and cutting more vividly and with greater precision than theorists themselves have ever been able to do. But the analysis is not in Keaton's head. It is in the film... Art is something done before it is something thought: Keaton's impulses were not only stronger but more accurate than any verbal formulation he might have chosen for them.⁷

However, whether well thought out intellectually or simply intuitive, one can see the ideas developed by Eisenstein illustrated in *Sherlock Jr.*

ATYPICALITY

Sherlock Jr. contains some scenes which are of a piece with Keaton's other work. At one point, for instance, Keaton and the woman are being chased in a car by the villains. When the villains are vanquished, Keaton slams on the brakes, and the chassis of the car shoots off the wheels and into a nearby small lake. Keaton puts the convertible roof of the car straight



up, using it like a sail, and the car is magically transformed into a boat. (A not especially well made one, perhaps, as the car/boat quickly sinks.) Such transformations of physical objects are common in Keaton's films. Towards the end of the short *The Playhouse*, for example, Keaton finds himself in the orchestra section of a small theatre that has just been flooded with water. Keaton keeps afloat in a large drum, using a small violin as an oar to row himself to the steps which will take him to dry land. In the Ancient Rome segment of *Three Ages*, to cite another example, Keaton takes a hat with a sharp pointy arrow on top and wedges it in front of a wheel of his chariot to keep the horses from running off.

In many ways, *Sherlock Jr.* is not typical of a Buster Keaton film. As we have seen, the character of Sherlock Jr. is a somewhat typical adventure/mystery hero who acts to solve the problems put before him. In virtually all of his other work, Keaton's protagonist is a passive character who reacts to forces which he cannot hope to control, but must simply endure. Think, for instance, of the climactic scene in *Steamboat Bill, Jr.*, in which Keaton runs through a town that is literally being blown apart by a hurricane around him, or the ending of *Seven Chances*, in which a mob of a thousand angry, jilted brides take on the qualities of a force of nature which Keaton has to survive. As mentioned above, Keaton abandoned his typical persona in the film within the film of *Sherlock Jr.* in order to point out the difference between real people and typical movie heroes.

Another fundamental way in which *Sherlock Jr.* differs from Keaton's other films is in the way logic is applied to the film's

dreamiest images. At one point in the film, Keaton admires himself in a mirror, then walks through it; in the next room, he opens a huge wall safe and walks out onto the street. These are easy enough effects to create (the "mirror" is actually a doorway and the other room is decorated to be a mirror image of the first, for instance, or the wall safe is actually a façade created to look like the room which is placed in front of a real street). The important point is that they are not given a logical reason to exist.

Compare this to the climax of the short *The Balloonatic*. Keaton and the woman in that film are floating down a river, Keaton gently strumming a ukulele. The couple is blissfully unaware that they are approaching a huge waterfall. (There is always a waterfall in silent comedy.) Keaton cuts between images of the couple in the canoe and the waterfall, building tension. Inevitably, the canoe starts nosing over the waterfall. It keeps going, but it doesn't fall; the canoe just gently floats off the waterfall into empty space. When the woman realizes that they are floating in mid-air, Keaton points over their heads, and we find that the canoe has been tied to the balloon that has popped up throughout the film. The image of the canoe drifting off the waterfall is as dream-like as anything in *Sherlock Jr.*, but it is grounded in an ultimately knowable cause and effect, however implausible. This is in marked contrast to many of the dreamy images of *Sherlock Jr.*, which completely abandon rational explanation.

In much of his other work, Keaton takes pains to set up his effects, which make them all the more startling. Halfway through *The Balloonatic*, for example, Keaton, hunting ducks from mid-air, hits the balloon, which falls to the ground. However, in a later scene, we see the balloon patched and Keaton refilling it with gas. In the penultimate shots of Keaton and the woman in the canoe, Keaton doesn't hide the ropes that snake upwards, but, because he doesn't show us the balloon, we don't know what their purpose is, and our attention is quickly taken over by the approaching waterfall.

An even better example of Keaton setting up an image takes place in the feature *Our Hospitality*. Keaton, unaware that he is being stalked by a couple of men who want to kill him, sits down in front of a pond and starts fishing. Elsewhere, we see two men blowing up a dam, liberating a huge amount of water. The water slowly trickles towards a rock overhang under which Keaton is sitting. Noticing water starting to drip around him, he pulls out an umbrella. It doesn't help him when a deluge of water subsequently washes over him, making him virtually invisible just as his stalkers enter the frame looking for him. The elements of the shot—Keaton fishing, the two men stalking him and the water—have all been introduced, but it's only after they have all come together and the gag has paid off that we can understand their importance.

In *Sherlock Jr.*, Keaton demonstrates that film logic doesn't have the kind of linear causality which he was careful to have in most of his other works. In addition to the mirror and safe, there is a scene where Keaton jumps through the stomach of his sidekick, as well as the brick wall he is standing against. This shot comes totally out of the blue, without set-up or explanation, and with no attempt at rational explanation.

That's film.

CONCLUSION

When people ask me why I have an interest in silent film comedy, I explain that my interest is in all things comedy, of which silent film just happens to be a part. When pressed, I will point out that there is much to learn from silent film, which, in many ways, is more sophisticated than current film.

Consider the idea of "physical comedy." Today's most vaunted physical comedian is Jim Carrey. Now, Carrey is a funny man. His rubbery face and limbs contort in entertaining ways in his comic films. However, one of the things you should notice about Carrey's brand of physical comedy is that it is wholly contained within his body, that he rarely interacts in comic ways with his physical environment.

This is a marked contrast to the silent film comedians, almost all of whose physical comedy arose out of an interaction between actors and environment. Think of Charlie Chaplin working on the assembly line or getting physically stuck in the cogs of the machine in *City Lights*. Think of Harold Lloyd climbing the side of a building in *Safety Last*. Think of all of the scenes out of Keaton films that I have described.

Carrey's brand of physical humour is a form of psychosis, an individual refusing to accept the physical and/or social norms of the world around him. The physical humour of the best silent film comedians is the exact opposite: character quirks notwithstanding, they are usually reasonable people trying to survive in a world that itself seems to have gone mad. Even the lesser silent film comedians are engaged with the real world in a way that today's physical comedians do not appear to be. This is a much more expansive understanding of physical comedy, and the individual's relationship with the physical world.

Cultural reference, and, specifically, cinematic reference, is nothing new. Keaton's *The Three Ages* is, in part, a parody of D. W. Griffith's *Intolerance*. Then current film stars used to show up in the Warner Brothers cartoons of the 1930s and 1940s. Despite its long history, and current popularity, nobody quite managed to capture the way film actually works in as sophisticated—and entertaining—a way as Buster Keaton in *Sherlock Jr.*

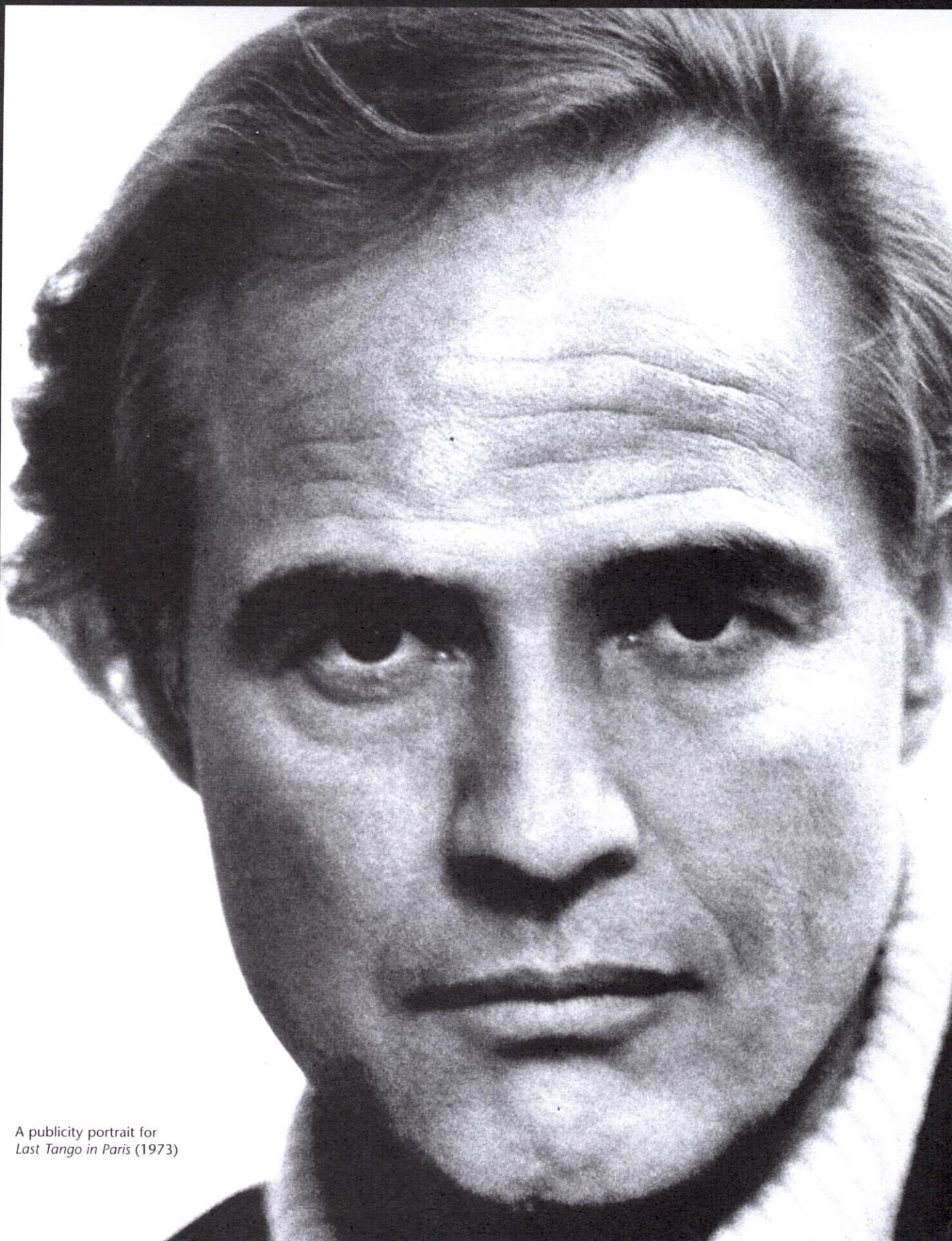
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NOTES

- 1 Ira Nayman, "Trends In Hollywood Screen Comedy," *Creative Screenwriting*, V2 N1, Spring 1995, 58.
- 2 Tom Dardis, *Keaton: The Man Who Wouldn't Lie Down*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1979, 106.
- 3 Charles Levin, *Jean Baudrillard: A Study in Cultural Metaphysics*, London: Prentice Hall, 1996, 149.
- 4 Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, James Strachey, trans., New York: Avon Books, 1965, 194.
- 5 *ibid*, 344.
- 6 Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Form*, Jay Leyda, trans., San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1949.
- 7 Walter Kerr, *The Silent Clowns*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975, 98.

IN MEMORIAM

Marlon Brando (1924–2004)
Method actor, Hollywood star, sex symbol



A publicity portrait for
Last Tango in Paris (1973)

CEYLAN AND COMPANY

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL TRAJECTORIES OF CINEMA

BY DIANE SIPPL

The sky... is the opposite of the eye: it is its immense rarefaction. If the eye focuses, the sky blurs. If the eye is clearly, albeit arbitrarily, the point of departure, the sky is an impossible destination, or better still, the dilated point of an impossible destination—the veil behind which everything is hidden... an iconostasis, a disfiguration, the place of the clouds.

The more the eye scrutinizes and deciphers what lies before it and above it, the more the structure of the sky—or the universe, with which it often coincides—becomes cloudy and loses its shape. It was once a vault, and now... a saddle... In any case, even when the eye knew how to see correctly, it only found partial animations in the sky: bears (Greater or Lesser), tails, scales, cancers, Venuses, lions, lanterns, torches and lights in such an exaggerated number that they could demoralize and confuse even a shepherd wandering through the Asian deserts, steppes (or are they tundras?)

—Luigi Ballerini, “Eliseo Mattiacci: Gazer of Skies and Horizons of Expectation”¹

**The truth lies in what's hidden, in what's not told.
Reality lies in the unspoken part of our lives.**

—Nuri Bilge Ceylan to Geoff Andrew in
“Beyond the Clouds...”²

I speak out of the deep of night
out of the deep of darkness
and out of the deep night I speak.

If you come to my dwelling, my friend bring me a lamp
and a window I can look through
at the crowd in the happy alley.

—Forugh Farrokhzad, “Gift,” in *Remembering the Flight*³



PRE-CREDIT SEQUENCE

My eyes move around the three circles that make up the figure standing before me just taller than the tallest of us. Circle within circle within circle, each connects with another but at opposite sides. The mid-sized one meets the largest, and directly across, the smallest touches the mid-sized. Autonomous yet connected, the first shares a center with the last. Each one a metal ribbon the girth of my finger and the width of two hands, the circles draw me in, luring, framing, and ushering my gaze. A strong wind is enough to sway the piece though it's anchored more than my feet to the ground. And its surface will change over seasons as I return, its corten curves rusting with time. Like me it will age, but behind me live its slow and secret life in company with its habitat that colors its atemporal form. There stands the *Eye of the Sky*, looking at me as I look out with it.⁴

CREDITS...

And now let's meet the sky-gazers, for I have been dwelling in their company, looking at them and with them, and I feel I know them well. There are Grandmother Fatma Ceylan and Grandfather Mehmet Emin Ceylan, "actors"; nephews Turgut Toprak and Mehmet Emin Toprak (call him "Saffet" or "Yusuf"), also "actors"; Havva Saglam as "Hulya" and both Cihat Butun and Muhammed Zimbaoglu as "Ali," playing the sister and brother who are younger cousins; Sadik Incesu as the "film producer"; Muzaffer Özdemir, playing "Mad Ahmet" or Muzaffer the "film director" or Mahmut the "photographer who aspires to make films," who could be representing the real man behind the scenes—

producer/director/screenwriter/cinematographer/editor of all four of the films to be explored here, Nuri Bilge Ceylan. His sister Emine wrote a story used for the script. Fatma and Mehmet are their real parents. It all starts with them.

Most critics, in discovering the potent beauty of Ceylan's work over the last decade, stress how rewarding it can be to move forward from *Cocoon* (1995) to *The Small Town* (1997) to *Clouds of May* (1999) to *Distant* (2002) in order to trace the evolution of this new voice.⁵ But just because what characterizes him for me is his quiet lyricism in revering his family and kin, I prefer to inch backwards, and little by little we shall then see how Ceylan has both admired and distinguished himself from the luminaries who surround him — Ozu, Tarkovsky and Kiarostami, for example. *Mirror* (1974), based on the events and poetry of Tarkovsky's own family, offers an apt comparison with *Cocoon* and *The Small Town*; while *Close-Up* (1990) and *The Wind Will Carry Us* (1999), both about the role of the filmmaker by a writer/director who rarely veers from that theme, shed light on *Clouds of May*. And even more telling is the inspiration of Chekhov, who haunts Ceylan's work like the Wood Demon himself.⁶ Now let's see how Ceylan navigates the dreams that bridge illusion and reality in his most recent film.

THE CITY: DISTANT

In the foreground a single freight hook, crusted with ice, swings like a pendulum as a man in the distance traverses an empty stretch of snow in astonishment. Half-sunk against the embankment on the Sea of Marmara, an enormous ocean ves-

sel is tipped on its side like a beached whale ignored and abandoned. Hoping for work as a sailor, Yusuf walks by the ship, caked with snow and white as a phantom as it creaks and groans. A loud splash caps the spell, and Yusuf runs off, suddenly overwhelmed. "You'd be away on long journeys," Mahmut has told him. "Can you take that kind of loneliness?" As for traveling, "every place looks the same."

But that's according to Mahmut, who came to the city years ago, and established as he is, can show for himself mostly photos of tiles. Photography's finished, the mountains, too, he tells himself, but his cronies taunt him that he used to want to make films like Tarkovsky's and go off to White Valley in search of the best shot. "Money doesn't make you happy, and here you're really looking for your past," they tell him. But that is not what irks them. "Maybe it's *you* who's done for," they jeer. "You're announcing your death before it happens. You've no right to bury your ideals!"

No wonder Mahmut looks for a victim in Yusuf, his cousin

from the village, who could never be humble enough for Mahmut but who needs to share his space. And Yusuf, vain enough in the village, here behaves like the mouse who's under attack in the household, lurking behind corners and walls to get a look at the pretty women of Istanbul, but without the courage or experience to make a move. Not that Mahmut has found any more fulfillment: in deliciously ironic parallel actions, the two deceive each other. Tired of the endless tracking shot of the metaphysical adventurers in their rail cars to the Zone in *Stalker*, Yusuf gives up on Mahmut's esoteric video "entertainment" and says good night. Finally alone, Mahmut pops in a porn video. By contrast, Yusuf "retires" to sneak in a call to his mama, and he tells her he's whispering because Mahmut's asleep. The jaded city artist and the country cousin green with both innocence and envy can find no peace with each other.

Yusuf and his dad have lost their jobs in the factory since a thousand people were laid off. Mahmut's losses are less vis-

Zerkalo (*The Mirror*)



ible. A woman visits him at night but they don't acknowledge each other in public. Even at his home we see her across the room in a remote, unfocused field of vision. In-focus is Mahmut in the foreground, his back to us in silhouette. And then there is his "ex." They meet one last time as she departs with a new man for a new country far away. What happened between her and Mahmut we can only piece together through stitches of dialogue: their marriage, pregnancy, abortion, and divorce — perhaps all a matter of bad timing — seem to have resulted in her infertility. "I don't blame you..." she reassures him.

Like Tarkovsky, Ceylan gives us stories that hinge on elisions of the main events. Yet we come to share the characters' outlooks and feelings through an elliptical language all the more poignant. Take, for example, a key scene from *Mirror* that Mahmut curls up on his bed to watch moments after saying good-bye to his former wife. Tarkovsky's Mother character, ready to faint from fatigue, is asked by a neighbor queasy from pregnancy to chop off the head of a cockerel if she and her son (suggesting the young Tarkovsky) would like to stay for dinner. With some reservation the Mother manages the action, and in the next frame she and her estranged husband walk on parallel, tragically separate paths. Ceylan, mirroring the emotional import of the sequence, cuts to parallel scenes of Mahmut and Yusuf separately watching the snowfall outside, each from his own window but with matching profiles, not only of the two men looking out but also of what they see. Mahmut, with Artemiev's score from *Mirror* still lingering in his ear, in his mind's eye sees Tarkovsky's actress walking directly to the right of the frame; Yusuf gazes down upon the neighbor woman he's had his eye on, who walks directly to the right of our frame on the street below. Yusuf walks out to the balcony and strikes the wind chimes. Mahmut goes to the window that separates them and assumes a parallel profile in a two-shot, then closes the balcony door.

"I would now happily cut out of *Mirror* the scene with the cock," wrote Tarkovsky years later.

We shot (Margarita Terekhova) in close-up at high speed for the last ninety frames, in a patently unnatural light. Since on the screen it comes out in slow motion, it gives an effect of stretching the time-framework — we are plunging the audience into the heroine's state... We deform the actress' face independently of her, as if it were playing the role for her. We serve up the emotion we want, by our own — director's — means. Her state becomes too clear, too easy to read. And in the interpretation of a character's state of mind, something must always be left secret.⁷

Those secrets might be retained in cinema not so much through the subtleties of acting or dialogue but by the director's feel for the character's interior as expressed in the rhythm of the narrative. Mahmut, after another interlude with his lover who leaves him with a sense of detachment, flares up at Yusuf when he returns a moment later. Mahmut lets all his resentment fly. "You smoke here when I'm out, you don't flush the toilet... and you want it all on a platter...." The tirade goes on, until Yusuf exits and sends a wound-up toy down the hallway — a soldier in combat khakis creeping along on his stomach swinging a rifle! We laugh out loud at the uncanny wit, at Yusuf's audacity and resilience and bad

taste, at the incongruity of it all, for we have not been expecting humor. What's more, when the generally sober Yusuf lets out a "Ha, ha, ha!" that is so forceful it seems bizarre, we shake with a belly laugh.

Yet this humor, running so close to the nerve, is of a piece with the film in its entirety — with its minimalist restraint, its associative content all but squeezed out of the story that nonetheless evolves with parallels and balances of images and compositions, repeating themes in minor moods and keys. In *Distant* the symmetrical narrative (book-ended by Yusuf's arrival and departure, coinciding with Mahmut's two trysts with his lover), the intermediate shots of objects and cityscapes that are part of the story (the mouse strip on the floor, the pouring snow outside the window), the off-screen sounds (whistles of ships and cries of gulls) that open up the frame, the graphic matches of contiguous editing (that both link Yusuf with, and separate him from, the women who attract him — or link Yusuf and Mahmut watching the same TV fashion show in separate apartments) all fuse the primary elements of Ceylan's film with the precision and economy noticeable in Ozu⁸ (as well as in Tarkovsky and Kiarostami, influenced by the same artist). The passion is in the whole: at the heart of the story is the structuring principle of growth. From the subjective arc (the view from the "ground") of characters who know that in their deceptions they are sinning against themselves, to the objective tale (as if from "above," an omniscience generally missing in later Ozu works) that clouds over one character as it shines a ray of light on another, emerges a story of truth: the mystery and danger in life reside in us.

Privy to the hidden habits of *Distant*'s characters, we are still left with plenty of questions. We may see Mahmut tormenting Yusuf over a pocket watch he never stole, but what of the watch? What does it mean to Mahmut, and to the story? What about the eggs Mahmut rolls across the mat in his photography studio? What of his dozing dream in which the lamp falls over as it does in *Mirror*? Let's look to the other films, presumably the ones Mahmut goes on to make — more ripples and waves in the cosmos of images that is Ceylan's.

THE FILM: CLOUDS OF MAY

When the cinema escapes from the power of money (I mean production costs), when they invent a way for the author of a work to capture reality with his own hands (paper and pen, canvas and paint, marble and chisel, "x" and the filmmaker), then we shall see. Then film will become first among the arts, and its muse the queen of all the muses.

—Andrey Tarkovsky in Maya Turovskaya, *Tarkovsky: Cinema as Poetry*⁹

You believe that you can capture reality. But it is impossible. You can always go further.

—Abbas Kiarostami, press kit for *Through the Olive Trees*¹⁰

Using cameras and equipment he owns, available light whenever possible, amateurs who are kin or friends playing the main roles (which are close to their own lives), improvisation

from the actors, and his own apartment as the location (for shooting and also for editing), Ceylan made *Distant*, his most autobiographical film¹¹ (he guesses 40%) with a budget of \$100,000.¹² The result is the kind of film he prefers to make, often with long takes of enticing in-frame movement or details before a camera fixed at a "golden point"¹³ or panning from it, with many sequences (even long and consecutive ones) using no dialogue and generally, ambient sound making its own "score" except on the surprising occasion when music comes from an on-screen source. The shots are frequently long or wide, and they make use of a combination of landscapes, natural elements, and symbolic objects specific to the setting to render a situation with hardly any narrative but laden with quiet tension. The goal is to make a film close to the inner lives of the characters. That Ceylan has been exploring the mechanics and art of photography since he was fifteen and became an electrical engineer — all the while devouring Dostoevsky and Chekhov — shows immensely. His frames are exquisite, and in the ways that he lets them breathe, he offers a poetic realism like no other. Now let's see what this mode of production and code of values would look like at another site.

A pre-credit sequence for *Clouds of May* shows Mehmet Emin Toprak — Yusuf from *Distant*, but here he will be Saffet — in a "two-shot": Saffet's face, at once tender and opaque, accompanied by its vivid reflection looking in a different direction in the adjacent window as he stands in a doorway waiting for someone to drop off his test scores from his college entrance exams. At a café he sits and slowly opens the news, the camera giving him long moments to register the results that fill his face with dismay. A pan to a transition shot with two older women nearby in peasant clothes chatting before an old wall that could have stood for centuries takes us back to Saffet sitting at the same table in his logo-stamped sweatshirt as young men on motorbikes speed past him. There is his doppelgänger once again, this time his dark shadow reflection looking away in the window behind him, his perplexed face in close-up for us.

The scene tacitly introduces a theme of doubles — in images, roles, and worlds, that undergoes various permutations throughout *Clouds of May*. There is the duality of acting, then the flow between the dream world and the real world, sleeping dreams and waking dreams. And there is the anthropomorphic environment — wind and rain, animals and skies that shadow and foreshadow the human predicaments but also reveal "minds" of their own (recall the pesky mouse in *Distant*). There are dual interpretations of the law, between land owners such as Mehmet Emin Ceylan and the region's forest authorities. All of these dualisms make for the question as to what kind of cinema is to materialize before our eyes, because the fact is, Muzaffer, a director from Istanbul, arrives in the village where he grew up to shoot a film about his family. "Is it going to be a documentary?" his mother asks. "Do they make movies with such small cameras?" quips his father, referring to what Muzaffer brought with him that day to do test shots. Little do they know that he expects them, Mehmet Emin and Fatma Ceylan, to be at the center of it all.

"We can't act," Fatma retorts. "Go find someone else." Emin is too consumed with protecting his tall poplars and

oaks from the land administration to be bothered with his son's project. When Muzaffer coaxes them into looking at old videos he shot of them to see how beautiful they are, his parents gasp at themselves on the TV screen and ask if the video camera adds wrinkles to their faces, as if a movie camera might catch them as they "really are." And when she hears thunder, Fatma asks, "Is it going to rain? Oh, it's from the TV!" she laughs. They sit watching for what seems the longest time because we are kept from seeing what they see, our eyes trained on the warm glow of their faces after work in the sun, of their sienna clothes and flowered couch against the sky-blue of the wall behind them. An elderly couple, they are radiant with youth. Muzaffer asks Saffet (Toprak) if he would quit his job at the factory once he started working on the film. "Of course," he replies, "Take me back to Istanbul with



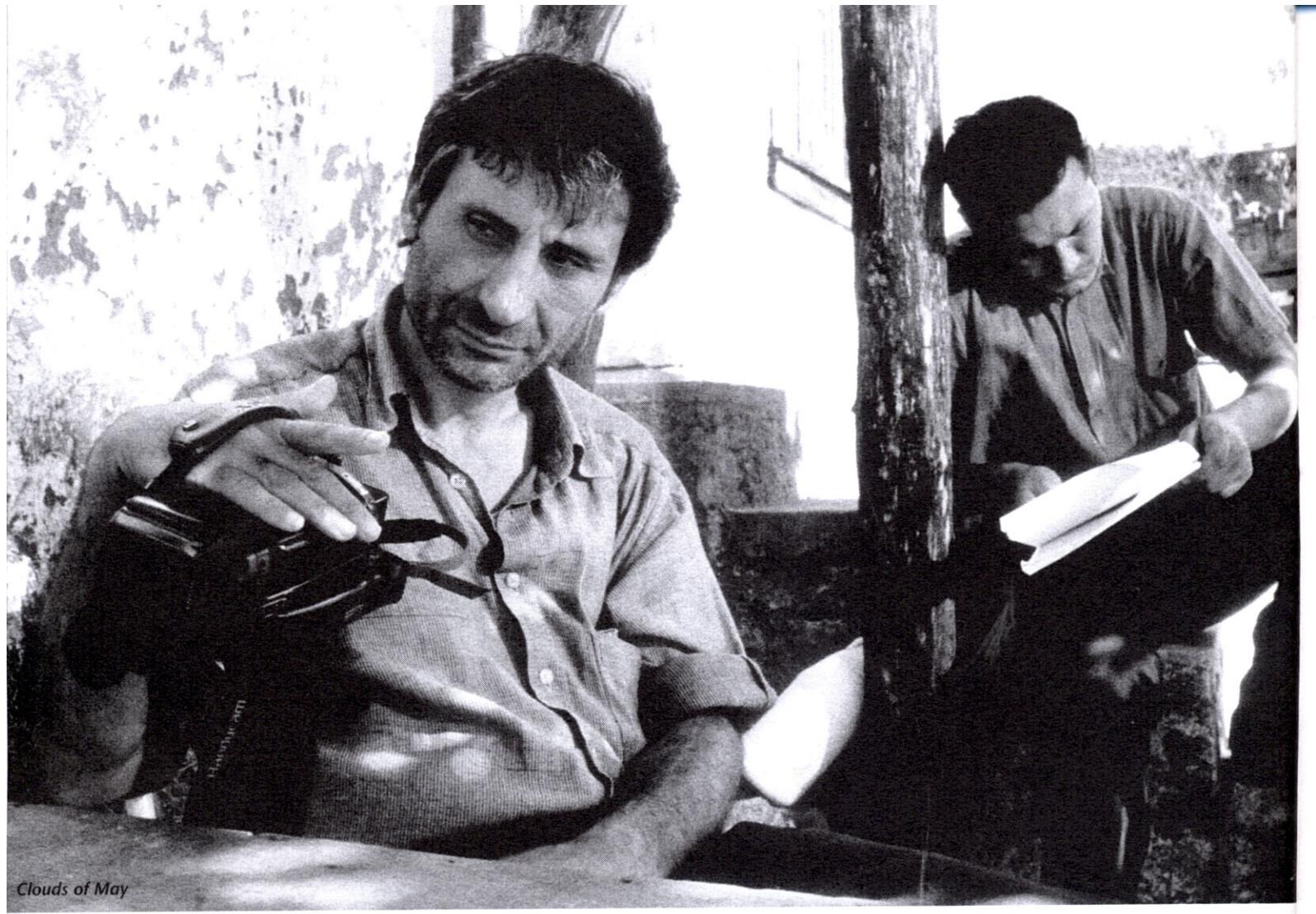
you..." as if that's what Muzaffer wanted. The intermingling of worlds (not only between cinema and reality but from one of Ceylan's films to the next) has already begun to transpire.

And not without duplicity, it seems. "All my friends have gone to the university, and they're all dumb... something fishy's going on," Saffet sighs. He detects a red light shining from his friend's camera. "Don't worry about it," responds Muzaffer, as he did to his father when the old man was about to trip on the cord of the microphone his son secretly set up near his parents' room one night. "Do you know what cheating is?" he later asks his young nephew, Ali. "That means tricking someone" is the answer the boy gives.

It's interesting at this moment to recall that in *Mirror* Tarkovsky used the doubling theme quite audaciously. The children's conflicts mirror those of the parents, the film itself

being a mirror of the break-up of his own parents' marriage with a pre-credit documentary sequence of a young man's therapy for stuttering and his successful endeavor to break into speech. There is the doubling of the mother and the wife, "double exposures"—one actor playing two roles, and two actors for one role, including the on-screen presence of Tarkovsky's real mother, quite elderly. And while Ignat is both himself and the author when he was a child, the voice-over poetry is read by the real-life father/poet, Arseniy Tarkovsky, and is laced with the narration of the author as an adult, read by actor Innokenty Smoktunovsky. Tarkovsky's wish in making the film was to "convince others... of (his mother's) individuality and uniqueness... and to prove her immortality."¹⁴ So he sought to present memory as a "fourth dimension" in which time could flow in any direction. A young mother's





Clouds of May

face in a densely clouded mirror is revealed as old "from the other side of the mirror's glass."¹⁵ As Maya Turovskaya has observed, Tarkovsky's desire to show the facts of his childhood led to the disintegration of his narrative structure, which in turn led (perhaps even against the author's original intentions) to an abundance of all kinds of rhetorical devices—metonymy, ellipse, simile, aposiopesis and other, purely cinematic figures—all of which demand an effort of interpretation from the audience. *Mirror* is the most concrete, but also the most indirect of Tarkovsky's films; the most documentary, while also the most poetic.¹⁶

Compare this result with that of another director also seeking to show the "facts" of the case of a real individual because he found them so enigmatic and yet so "telling" of the need to dream and the power of cinema. That director is Abbas Kiarostami, who seized the moment to make *Close-Up*, a re-creation of real events played by the real participants. Ali Sabzian served a jail sentence for posing as the renowned Iranian filmmaker, Moshen Makhmalbaf, because he so admired him. Out of work for some time, Sabzian had ingratiated himself with the wealthy Ahankah family, promising to make a film in which they could be the actors on the set of their own beautiful home. Flattered and buying into the dream, they took him at appearances for the role he played,

fed him, allowed him to scout out their rooms, and even gave him bus fare.

The ease with which Mrs. Ahankah was duped at the outset is reminiscent of Chekhov's "The Kiss" in multiple directions: not only does Sabzian's life take on a whole new zest for all its possibilities in filmmaking, but the Ahankahs suddenly feel invigoratingly talented, useful, and even "necessary." Sabzian urges them to go see *Salaam Cinema*¹⁷ before it leaves the theater. This vitality is so overriding that even when the son and husband catch on to Sabzian and set up a "bust" in their home, Mrs. Ahankah wards off the arrest and insists, "Well, let him have his lunch first." Nonetheless, the family brings a law suit against him for fraud and the intent to rob them. By reconstructing this series of events with the actors playing themselves, especially by using close-ups of Sabzian in the courtroom, Kiarostami fulfills the man's promise. Everyone gets to participate in making a film after all. What's more, Kiarostami even arranges and incorporates into his fiction film a meeting between Sabzian and Makhmalbaf. And characteristic of Kiarostami's own elisions in storytelling is the drowning out of their conversation by Makhmalbaf's motorcycle noise as Sabzian, humbled with awe, holds onto him while he drives through the city. In a circle of ironies, this sets off a dizzying series of reflections:

...one knows one is watching a fiction film (Kiarostami's *Close-Up*) that is based on fact (Sabzian's real story) that is based on fiction (Sabzian pretending to be Makhmalbaf) that is based on fact (Makhmalbaf as a leading Iranian filmmaker) that is based on fiction (Makhmalbaf making fictional stories in film) that is based on fact (the reality Makhmalbaf transforms into fiction).¹⁸

Kiarostami sees *Close-Up* as an anti-cliché film: "Something actually happened in the film that was inspired entirely by the subject matter and the characters involved."¹⁹ The real people, from opposite social strata, came to accept each other through the cinema. Yet what was it that had attracted the characters to each other in the first place? Fascinated by the interplay between fact and fantasy, Kiarostami wanted to explore all that Sabzian was seeking. The director has his own answer:

He wasn't a fraud, rather he was infatuated by an image. That's why what a filmmaker could do for him was to rehabilitate him, to portray him as a young man in love with the cinema... Sabzian is a martyr, a man in love, although many are convinced he's an impostor. The truth I am eagerly trying to pull out... is that deep down, he's a good man.²⁰

Some might take issue with Kiarostami's concept and method of rehabilitation, yet he insists that the "culprit" must be regarded through the eyes of an artist and not judged by a court of law because, at a loss for what the society should have been able to provide him when he needed it, he has resorted to his imagination, though there is no space for him to express it.²¹

What a different character Kiarostami offers us in *The Wind Will Carry Us* — a filmmaker sent from Teheran with a small crew to the Kurdish countryside, near Urumiye, to a place named White Village that they call "Black Valley," to document the burial ritual of an elderly woman "about to die." To some extent the situation is analogous to that in *Clouds of May*, with filmmaker Muzaffer and his assistant, Sadik, the producer, arriving from Istanbul to impose on the Ceylan family their desire to make a film in western Anatolia enlisting Muzaffer's parents. For example, one of the most successful patterns of repetition in *The Wind Will Carry Us* is the routine by which the camera eye adjusts with sensitivity and wit its angle, distance, and frame for capturing the villagers — young and old, men and women — relentlessly at work, tending to the harvest or the babies or the digging beside the idle filmmaker whose human subject, one of the village elders, is too healthy and steadfast to become exoticized up for the consumption of urban dwellers by way of her funeral.

"Are you always going to sit in the shade like this?" Emin jibes Muzaffer, who is parked at a table on the grass with his tiny camera like a fifth appendage, leaning back in his chair, contemplating his production as the wind blows the leaves of his notebook up against his raised feet and then blows the leaves of trees along the ground. The father has cut hay with a scythe, filled buckets from a well and watered his young trees, hauled kindling, and finally resists his son's offer to chop it because Muzaffer doesn't know how and has to be



shown. Emin sprays his trees with pesticides from a tank on his back and our camera (after an intermediary shot to a tadpole fleeing through the stream) tracks him in real time, in his old shorts and mud boots and wide-brimmed straw hat, all the way back to the tool shed. "Are films shot with a small camera like this?" the father asks repeatedly. Muzaffer, all but dozing in the warm wind, looks aloof to the old man, but our camera shows him watching, with a mindful eye, and listening, to his father's elaborate explanation of the natural history of his woods and the land survey team's heedless policies. It's worth noting that this scene immediately follows a glorious establishing shot of the golden meadow and rich green forest, in which Ceylan's 35 mm Aaton pans across the horizon from the village to the hills to the woods and then, with a point-of-view shot shared by father and son, creates a nearly circular shooting space that returns to them and their seamless vista.

While *The Wind Will Carry Us*, also a handsomely mounted critique of the self-willed filmmaker, speaks with a visual language of awe-inspiring landscapes, its human interactions are truncated, and Kiarostami restricts his lens to very few faces, mostly those of the director (endlessly shaving on his balcony and thereby drawing even more attention to his face, or driving to "higher ground" to talk on his cell phone to the people in his production office in Teheran, whom we never see) and his schoolboy informant, unreliable as he may

choose to be. The camera (as in earlier and especially subsequent Kiarostami films) presents most of the other faces as structured absences within the frame or just outside it, some upstaged by the director's body, others obscured by the bundles of grain they transport or the ditches they dig or the walls of their abodes (as is the case with Mrs. Malek, the occasion for the documentary to be made, who lives — conveniently — below the director so he can spy on her hovel), even though these people are vital to the life of the village (for example the school teacher's mother whose history-scared face we never get to see) and to the parable of the larger film — which tells us, among other maxims, that life renews itself and is too precious to be spent waiting for its end. For proof, the director kicks over a tortoise in exasperation and the animal, left to its own devices, turns itself over using the edge of a plant and keeps right on going!

Ceylan's approach to a similar theme is nearly antithetical in its lingering on faces that may be expressive or impenetrable, on gestures and activities, allowing them their natural time and rhythms, favoring middle distances to close-ups in order to bind the living form to its animate space, even for perusing the family photographs that are a motif of the film-inside-the-film. An un-self-conscious fondness for the subject emerges organically from this shooting style (to the extent, for example, that in *Clouds of May* the tortoise actually pushes the frame as it motivates the camera into its own screen space leaving Muzaffer to fend for himself in the rain, and in *The Small Town* the tortoise is personified in Ali's guilty dream as his mother rolls off a window ledge trying to turn herself upright, after earlier that day the boy left the tortoise on its back). Native to the region and known to live long lives, the tortoises in each film are suggestive of the elders who stubbornly resist death, but if Kiarostami's director vents his frustration on the animal, Ceylan's child is merely testing his own curiosity, as his sister does when she stands on the creature's shell. Life in all its peculiarities is astounding.

If Kiarostami himself is drawn to the particulars of village life in "Black Valley," the bored director and film crew in *The Wind Will Carry Us* become preoccupied with the "fruits of the land" — literally strawberries, and figuratively speaking, the local "berries" in comparison with "those of Teheran." Likewise, the distracted banter of the film team centers on the quest for "country milk" until the director finally finds it from exactly the right source. In contrast to *Mirror*'s cameos of Tarkovsky's mother and its poetry by his father (let alone vignettes of the filmmaker coming of age as a "guiding light"), Kiarostami's centerpiece scene here offers a curious homage. First, it is separated from the larger fiction film's pursuit of the documentary that never gets made by a cut to a long moment with a black screen. Then the scene's esoteric setting of a cellar barn reached via a dark staircase and the chiaroscuro lighting that selects and excludes images for the composition of the shot are used to illustrate allegorically the director character's monologue, which is his recitation and seductive "teaching" of Forugh Farrazkhad's celebrated poem (after which Kiarostami entitles his film).²² The entire scene is structured, it would seem, to evoke and honor the beloved poet, to sustain the tenor of her poem, which suggests a longing for human connection and the frail beauty of that wish.

What Kiarostami achieves by inserting the poem into his film in this way is both questionable and controversial. It's worth more than a footnote here to direct further reflection on the matter to Hamid Dabashi's thoughtful and articulate discussion of the film in relation to issues of gender, ethnicity, the potential of the camera, and the global uses of cinema.²³ Beyond this, though he claims he doesn't like metaphors, Kiarostami's entire film is a metonymic interpretation of the poet's poignant stanzas and his own figuring of them as a critique of insensitive ethnographic filmmaking (which is enterprising enough, and invites a whole new layer of reflection on "films about filmmaking," given the poet's fame for her own ethnographic documentary of a leper colony not far from "Black Valley" near Tabriz, the capital of Iranian Azerbaijan, *The House Is Black*). For the sake of focusing this discussion on Ceylan, suffice it to say that one of the final shots of *The Wind Will Carry Us*, the panorama of White Village/Black Valley perched in the twilight as lamps are lit in each hillside home, is spellbinding. The lights shine suspended in the air between heaven and earth, and the sensation is as memorable and emblematic of the film as any of its artful moments.

Nonetheless, what we see in Ceylan is another approach to the quiet magic of human connection altogether — in the narrative, the characters, and the wordless poetry of his creation of space and time. In all his films, Ceylan is not an outside intruder (as if Kiarostami's "director" had the capacity to emanate this effect, given the village's relative indifference to him); Ceylan is going home, to the people and place where he has spent all of his childhood (Kasaba or Turgutlu) or youth and adulthood (Istanbul). Muzaffer's motivations are not expressed in dialogue in *Clouds of May*, and he may yawn with boredom on occasion or deride his cast, but their positions regarding his seeming obsession to film them are the fiber and texture of the story. Emin's determination to stake his ground against the land administration and devote twenty more years to the regeneration of the forest, little Ali's perseverance to carry a hen's egg in his pocket for forty days without breaking it to prove the responsibility Fatma demands of him in exchange for a musical watch, and Saffet's predisposition to dream of a bigger life rather than to make it happen are the rituals of daily life that obstruct Muzaffer's filmmaking.

"Boil the egg," the director tells the child.

"That would be cheating," responds Ali.

"Well, it's going to hatch with the heat of your hand," the adult informs the child.

And would that be so bad? Ali holds the egg up to his ear to see if he can hear it. "It's the birds," he realizes. But it could be the chick, or the film, in Ceylan's loving hands.

Not only are the characters' preoccupations the pulse of the narrative—just look at their gait as they march off on their missions—but their dreams are the heartbeat that allows each of them to suffer Muzaffer's whim at all. And suffer it they do, reluctantly, but gracefully—not at first, and not at all like professionals, but like the characters Muzaffer wants. "Things that happen behind the camera are more fascinating, more life-like, more down-to-earth," says Kiarostami, who made *Through the Olive Trees* to address the process of shoot-

ing a film, his own film, *And Life Goes On*.²⁴ Muzaffer's parents play along with him, indulging his wish, chiding him or goading him from time to time — "You put me in these peasant clothes..." grumbles Fatma — or just being their inquisitive, reasonable and good-natured selves.

Unlike Kiarostami's key scene in the barn, in Ceylan's scene at the campfire the director actually shoots the film-inside-a-film, alluding to the real Ceylan film, *The Small Town*. Rather than silencing a main character in a keyhole point of view with the director character's nearly disembodied voice reciting someone else's poetry, Ceylan unspools the minor anti-climaxes of Chekhovian characters with all their foibles adamantly vocalizing their needs.

"If God permits, I want to live at least another twenty years," Emin repeats flatly.

"Papa, you look at the camera too much... Saffet, the pauses between your prompts to him are too long. We can't solve this in the dubbing..." Muzaffer harps.

But his father is distracted, and grabs the klieg light to shine it up at the trees. And to our delight, a gleaming reverse shot gazes from a tree-top angle down on all of them. "They've marked every tree, like a string of pearls," announces Emin. "And you're wasting my time with a film!"

After an impasse the son agrees to fix the father's typewriter for him so he can complain to the authorities, and they begin again. "Try to laugh a bit more," Papa. And Emin finally gets the lines right and punctuates them with a loud, outrageously forced, "Ha, Ha, Haah!" It seems to run in the family, even from city to city, and from film to film.

In a world of such precarious emotions, no parables are fitting. For example, Ali can't learn the lesson of responsibility properly because he cheats with a stolen egg when his breaks, because he switches his goal to a watch that has a torch and a pen knife *as well as* music, and because, as Fatma has indicated to Muzaffer, Ali could have been taught it without the egg in the first place. So likewise the film's larger "lesson," on the value of life's fleeting days, doesn't work as a parable either. The closing shot of old Emin putting the campfire out at dawn, alone under a tree in his beloved woods with Ali's discarded egg in his pocket, fades to a white sky after he falls "asleep." We are moved not by what we know, as with the funeral in *The Wind Will Carry Us* and a director who is not shooting it, but by what we feel and can never know, the movement between sleep and dream, or, perhaps, between this world and a hereafter, a somewhere beyond.

And then there is memory, which rekindles time, and we can notice that Ceylan achieves it in *Clouds of May* as matter of rhythm in handling his theme of doubles. Earlier the boy has sat waiting for Fatma, unwittingly raising the bile of his Uncle Emin by tapping a rat-a-tat-tat with his feet that echoes the pecking of the elder on his typewriter. "Sit properly!" barks Emin. Then Ali, bored, takes an heirloom photo off the wall, one of Emin and Fatma in their early days, and holds it up to his squinting eye as he blocks out Fatma to compare Emin's current face with his younger one. It doesn't help that Emin can see him do this from the other room, but which is worse — that, or the nagging, pronounced passing of time as Ali waits, which is exacerbated by the swinging, creaking door he leaves open once he gets kicked out? Time is passing, Emin

knows, in years and in moments, and it shapes the film we are watching but mostly within each frame; it is this quiet rhythm, within the moments, that breathes life into Ceylan's films.

THE SMALL TOWN: KASABA

And so there opens up before us the possibility of interaction with infinity, for the great function of the artistic image is to be a kind of detector of infinity . . . towards which our reason and our feelings go soaring, with joyful, thrilling haste.

—Andrey Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time*²⁵

Just as the winter wonderland of *Distant* could be a snowy park in Moscow if it weren't for the minarets of mosques in lieu of crosses on golden cupolas, as *The Small Town* opens we could be seeing Dostoevsky's Idiot or Ivan the Fool from any Russian village, but he's Mad Ahmet (Muzaffer Özdemir, once again), and Ali Kayaci's clarinet improvisation is exotic in its soulful solo. While *Clouds of May* is dedicated to Anton Chekhov, *The Small Town* is scripted from Emine Ceylan's autobiographical short story, "The Cornfield," and Chekhov gets a writer's credit along with Nuri Bilge Ceylan and his sister. The film's themes can be stated simply enough: children evolve from the rather wild and ruthless creatures they themselves discover in nature into compassionate human beings capable of kindness and forgiveness. At a gathering of three generations, they hear of war, death, hunger, and work, and as we do, they come to see their place in the family, the society, and the world. Yet as with all attempts to summarize poetry, this account tells nothing of the magic and wonder of the film in its everyday reality.

As is characteristic of Chekhov's work, at the core of *The Small Town* is the potential for growth, and it radiates outward. The use of space in the film follows circular patterns. Like pebbles tossed into the pond, the children, Hulya and Ali, and the adolescent Saffet as well make "waves" splashing up against parents and teachers, codes and laws. But at the center of it all — and somewhere in the sky — are their dreams. Clouds roll over the hills. Snow falls, and the cycle begins.

Two sequences are unforgettable in *The Small Town* and offer what could be called "signature scenes" of Ceylan's fascination with the revolving image through air and light. Together they set the pattern for an extended sequence later in the film in which flickering light structures a rotation of soliloquies around a summer night campfire. But first let's see what happens between the outdoor roll call at school, as children recite their patriotic vows of respect, support, and successful work, and the teacher's arrival in the classroom. One child, the last one in, gets the impulse to knock over a snowman standing just before the entry. Another, in the "dead" of winter, has launched the flight of a feather with his warm breath and enticed his classmates to join him. The feather floats from current to current aloft the puff of each new breath like an immortal snowflake looking for mischief — or adventure, or fantasy, but not the stove pipe that traps it near the ceiling before it makes its descent past the teacher's nose and onto his desk.

What is it that saves the scene, actually one long shot-sequence, from looking pretentious or gratuitous or being just a "flourish of style"? There is the time it takes as it lures the camera — the lens itself and the point of view — the reverie of each individual child as the feather, with its own inherent and organic time as opposed to that which is metered and monitored by the teacher, takes up its path, not unlike the fellow classmate Ismael who, as one child watches with fascination from the window, trudges down the hill from afar, knee-deep in snow with each boisterous step, dripping as he arrives, placing his icy boots near the fire at the room's center, hanging his wet socks on the stove pipe above it, and bashfully-brazenly setting a desk next to the cast-iron furnace where he sits with his bare feet, ready to join the ongoing lesson.

"The dominant, all-powerful factor of the film image is *rhythm*, expressing the course of time within the frame," Tarkovsky tells us. And this rhythm of the movement of time is the organizing force of a film's dramatic development.

The image is tied to the concrete and the material, yet reaches out along mysterious paths to regions beyond the spirit — perhaps that is what Pushkin meant when he said that 'Poetry has to be a little bit stupid.'²⁶

So we feel the pressure of the time that runs through each frame, the living and breathing of what is visibly recorded, and we sense something happening beyond the events in front of us. Each moment arrives "independently and with dignity," and its ideas "find their place... without fuss, bustle, haste."²⁷

Ponder a sustained shot of Saffet, the angle low so as to place him in the sky, in stasis amidst a dozen chairs flying by in the clouds, carrying youths on a carnival ride as they whirl past him in their own orbit, dangling, kicking, laughing, screaming in the heady vocals of a loudspeaker's songs. The swirl of bodies could be a dream — muted in color, light, and line — for we see it in the shadows of the moving clouds, reflected in the water of a well. Saffet is there, too, only he's in focus. Right away we're inside his heart, but we wait a whole season to hear his feelings, at a summertime corn roast by the fire:

I've got no home, no friends, no job. I'm a loser. You're fed up with my discontentment. I've no talent for anything. I'm like a useless cigarette butt. My best years were wasted stuck in this town. My manhood and my heart are melting away before my eyes. There were deeper ties binding me... when I was away in the service — the scent of pine, oaks, quiet mornings, stray dogs... what's wrong with wanting to go some place where something serious is going on?

And around the fire, Grandfather Emin telling of his battles and feats in Turkey and India, the little ones filling in when he forgets and asking for the parts with elephants or Alexander the Great in times of old. The father segues to tales of the town and its needs, and family feuds open up to personal memories and dreams that flicker in the flames or rustle in the leaves — Fatma's tears, little Ali's guilt, his father's resignation, Saffet's alienation, Grandfather's hope, and the bard's sense of renewal, for we are hearing Emine Ceylan's "The Cornfield" all the while we see the elements — fire and snow, water and sky, the earth and the heavens — that make up Ceylan's "small town."

THE PARENTS: COCOON

So much, after all, remains in our thoughts and hearts as unrealized suggestion.

—Andrey Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time*²⁸

A man. A woman. First separate, then together. First younger, then older. First photographs, then moving faces. The rumble of a drum, a bell, a chime, a gong, the sound of a closing door. Then a wipe to a black screen. And an opening to a world with all that now becomes ours: cornfields, a tombstone, the wind making a ruckus in the trees, clouds darkening in the sky. The woman crosses the water by boat. The man falls asleep as she fades away in a television dream. Their photo on the forest floor, buried in foliage, soil, and rain. A duckling struggles in the current, minnows swim against the flow of water reeds... an empty house with only the ropes that once held a cradle from the beams, swinging. A boy kicks over a beehive, a tortoise pulls back inside his shell, the man chops down a tree. A cat lies dead, face-up, a white feather flapping on his belly. Drops hit window panes like falling tears, and outside falls the snow. The man sleeps by a bonfire, alongside heavy shadows.

We could describe the same film—Ceylan's 20-minute short, in luscious black and white without a word of dialogue — in the language of Ozu, with its eye-matched frames of photographed faces, circular *mise en scène*, transition shots to the cat or the stove, elided scenes, and sounds from somewhere near. Or in Tarkovskian terms of mirrored dreams, or in Chekhovian dualities. But we know it as Ceylan's, as it always was — life in all its astonishment, vanishing before our eyes, for it is perishable. And it is eternal.

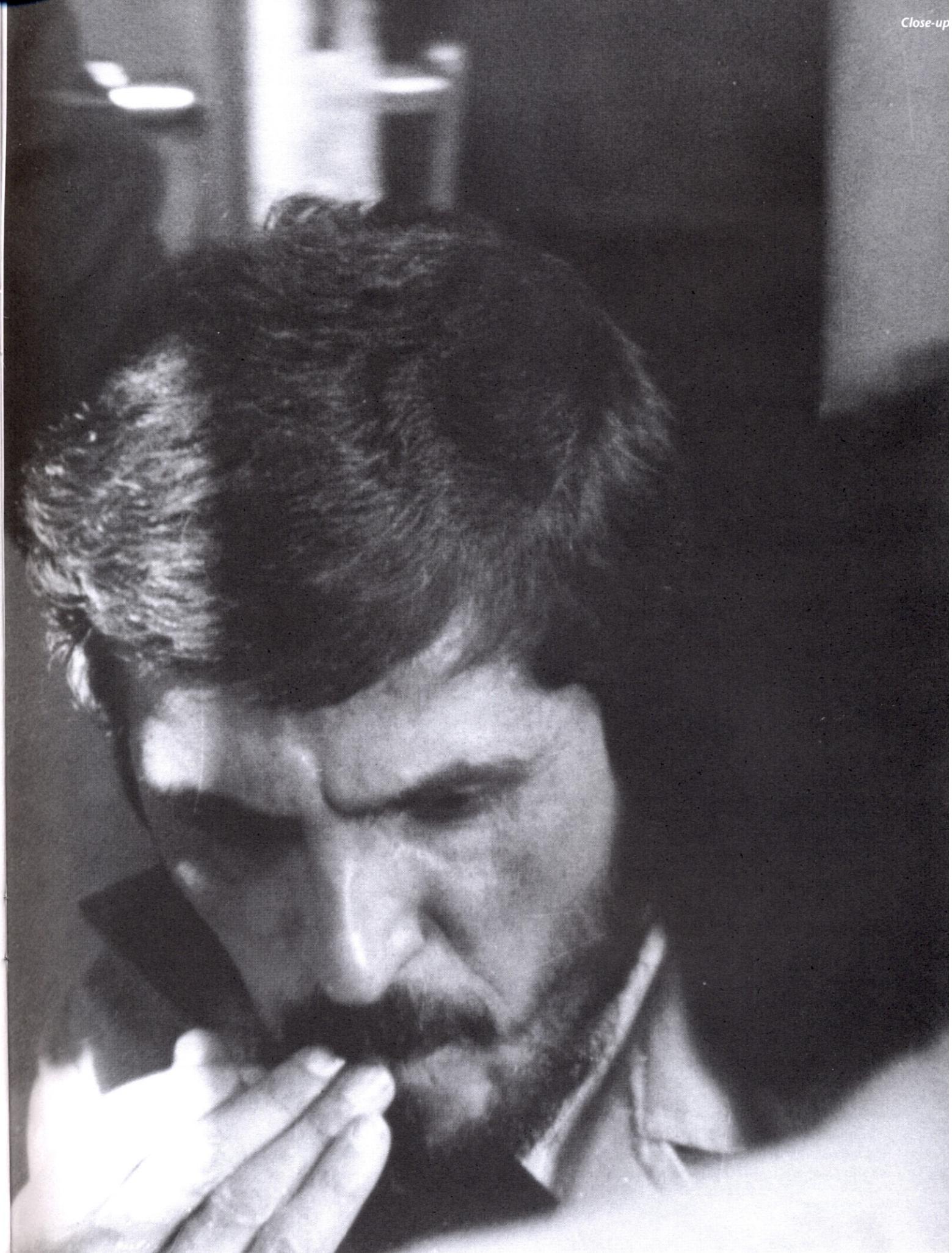
The image, embodying life in all its uniqueness, stretches out into infinity, Tarkovsky tells us; it is the form that comes closest to expressing the filmmaker's world, to "making incarnate his longing for the ideal." As such it is an impression of the truth, or a glimpse of it, for we can never see to the end of all it points to. What's more, it generates the most embattled and mutually exclusive of feelings. Therefore, the image is not "a certain *meaning*... but an entire world reflected as in a drop of water".²⁹

END CREDITS

A poet is something you are allowed to be, but not allowed to become.

—Herman Hesse³⁰

Like Tarkovsky, Kiarostami was attracted to drawing as a child, and while Tarkovsky studied cinema, Kiarostami studied fine art and went on to discover the Italian neorealists. Preferring to shoot on location, to work with children and non-professional actors, and to improvise rather than relying strictly on a formal screenplay, he works as Ceylan does. Using the camera as an unobtrusive observer in art and in life, Kiarostami has given audiences *vérité*-like representations of the naked, palpable, sensual, real world. Likewise he has taught filmmakers how to explore that world, spend time in





it, respond to it without requiring it to mean something else, something bigger. That is, he brings us life before it gets named and boxed and super-scribed, before it is coded with conventions for looking at screens. Kiarostami has come to see cinema as a non-didactic way of teaching.

Ceylan, however, indulges his camera gaze on his parents, cousins, and friends with all the devoted attention with which Ignat scrutinizes Da Vinci's drawings or Tarkovsky conjures Breughel in *Mirror*. The details of Ceylan's films may be tiny and subtle, but each illuminates a larger view. The dualities in his world shift from doubles to rhymes to dreams as seamlessly as clouds, pregnant as the month of May. Ceylan comes to film, and film to Ceylan, without barriers. It's as if he etches his colors on glass, each stroke delicately distinct but of a piece with the others, moving and growing as we look at them, with their own moods and tones but Ceylan's loving light shining through them.

Ceylan has discussed making *Clouds of May* as a way of repenting for his own disinterested behavior toward his family in filming *The Small Town*.³¹ Likewise he has pointed to a relation between himself and the photographer in *Distant*, explaining him as an intellectual whose habits are problematic

because, earning money, he feels he doesn't need other people:

... So you don't want anything from other people, and in return you don't give anything to people. It's as if you've earned the right not to help others, by having become economically strong enough not to need the help of others.³²

At the same time, not working toward his ideals, Mahmut dislikes himself and "turns that dislike onto others..."

I was like that, before finding cinema. With film I could create a peace in my soul. It's like therapy; you put the dark aspects of yourself into films, and get rid of them—or at least control them better.³³

Kiarostami has talked about himself in relation to *Close-Up*, but in a somewhat different light. In watching it from the projection room as it premiered at a festival:

I was drawn to what was happening in Sabzian's head. The film was like therapy. I was so much like Sabzian and the Ahankhah brothers—I also cheat and get cheated, I also need

respect. The identification I felt with Sabzian was something I thought only I felt because we have the same social background, but at the festival people related so deeply to him, they came up to ask me how he was doing today...³⁴

Interestingly, Kiarostami looks at the receiving end, Ceylan at the making end. And Tarkovsky, we can say, enters at the point of theory. Striving to make a film about a man who was tormented by the feeling that he hadn't loved his family enough, he made *Mirror* to address the sorrow, anxiety, and pain. "When I finished (it)...childhood memories which for years had given me no peace suddenly vanished, as if they had melted away."³⁵ At last he stopped dreaming about the house where he had lived so many years, where something always prevented him from entering. And in *Mirror* the adult narrator tells us,

When I dream of the log walls and dark pantry, I sense that it's only a dream. Then joy is clouded, for I know I'll wake up. Sometimes something happens, and I stop dreaming of the house and the pines by the house of my childhood. Then I grieve and wait for the dream... that will make me a child again, and I'll be happy again, knowing... that all still lies ahead... and nothing is impossible.

Each artist, we see, holds up illusions for what they are — the looming response to the need for them. And each knows full well the cost of losing them.

And so each is master in his own way (often in spite of himself): Tarkovsky the Messiah, Kiarostami the Teacher, and Ceylan the Good Doctor, at our disposal.³⁶ The surrealist, the neorealist, the impressionist administering spirituality, morality, and compassion, in turn, for the sake of one's art, one's fellow citizens, one's family. Offering neither proofs nor explanations but ambiguities and contradictions, they confound us with questions — how did we get here and where are we headed, how do we live with our ideals and our limits, how can we be intimate when as the world grows it slips away? We look at these questions from one author's works to the next, for we find a dynamic interplay among these artists and within their own works as well. Ceylan as case-in-point, we find *Cocoon* to be at the core of each subsequent work, linking their images and characters, settings and motifs with resonance and warmth. As a whole Ceylan's oeuvre at once dilates and focuses our world with perspectives and experiences that point to but are not the same as the myriad ones before them. The Eye of the Sky looks on—through and beyond the clouds, to the truth in you and me.

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NOTES

1 Ballerini, Luigi, "Eliseo Mattiacci: Gazer of Skies and Horizons of Expectation," *Mattiacci: Occhio del Cielo*, Danilo Montanari Editore, Ravenna, Italy, 2005.

- 2 Andrew, Geoff, "Beyond the Clouds: An Interview with Nuri Bilge Ceylan," www.sensesofcinema.com, June, 2004, p. 5.
- 3 Farrokhzad, Forugh, "Gift," *Remembering the Flight: Twenty Poems by Forugh Farrokhzad*, Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak, Ed., Nik Publishers, Port Coquitlam, British Columbia, Canada, 1997. The volume also contains her poem, "The Wind Will Take Us Away," and both poems are recited in their entirety in Abbas Kiarostami's *The Wind Will Carry Us*, 1999.
- 4 Eliseo Mattiacci's *Eye of the Sky* was installed as a gift of the artist in the Sculpture Garden at the University of California, Los Angeles on May 26, 2005.
- 5 Andrew, Geoff, "Beyond the Clouds...", p. 1.
- 6 "If I like my heroine... then I don't hide it in the story... the important thing for me (is) the falsity of the heroes against their own truthfulness. Peter Dmitrich lies and plays the clown in court, he's dull and hopeless, but I cannot conceal that by nature he's a nice gentle man. Olga lies at every step, but there's no need to hide the fact that this lying is painful for her," Chekhov tells us in *The Party and Other Stories*, p. 8. Duality, duplicity, and self-delusion are only some examples of all the themes that Chekhov and Ceylan share, let alone their poetics of nature, time, the seasons and all their accompanying images.
- 7 Tarkovsky, Andrey, *Sculpting in Time*, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., New York, 1987, p. 110.
- 8 Bingham, Adam, "The Spaces In-Between: The Cinema of Yasujiro Ozu," *CineAction Magazine*, Issue 63, Spring, 2004.
- 9 Tarkovsky, Andrey in Turovskaya, Maya, *Tarkovsky: Cinema as Poetry*, Boston, Faber and Faber, 1989, p. 71
- 10 Kiarostami, Abbas in Rohani, Omid, "Interview with Abbas Kiarostami, Film, Teheran, 1994.
- 11 Ceylan, Nuri Bilge, interview included on DVD of *Distant*, NBC Film, 2002.
- 12 Thomas, Kevin, "Mismatched Pair Connect," *Los Angeles Times*, September 24, 2004, p. E14.
- 13 Ceylan, Nuri Bilge, interview included on DVD of *Distant*, NBC Film, 2002.
- 14 Tarkovsky, Andrey in Turovskaya, Maya, p. 61.
- 15 Tarkovsky, Arseniy in Turovskaya, Maya, p. 68.
- 16 Turovskaya, Maya, p. 66
- 17 *Salaam Cinema* is Makhmalbaf's fiction film about the havoc that acting in cinema can wreak on one's life. The casting for that film is documented in his mock(?)umentary, *Cinema, Cinema*, for which 100 actors were needed and 50,000 showed up at auditions.
- 18 Dabashi, Hamid, *Close-Up: Iranian Cinema*, London, Verso, 2001, p. 67.
- 19 Kiarostami, Abbas, interview included on DVD of *Close-Up*, 1990.
- 20 Catalog for International Film Festival, Locarno, Switzerland, 1990.
- 21 Kiarostami, Abbas, interview included on DVD of *Close-Up*, 1990.
- 22 See "The Wind Will Take Us Away," *Remembering the Flight: Twenty Poems by Forugh Farrokhzad*.
- 23 Dabashi, Hamid, *Close-Up: Iranian Cinema*, London, Verso, 2001. As a hint at this discussion, two quotes: If Satyajit Ray, Akira Kurosawa, and (prior to this) Abbas Kiarostami had "restored a universal dignity to the people they redrafted for the world at large," in the stable scene of *The Wind Will Carry Us*, Kiarostami does precisely the opposite of universalizing Iranian dignity; he begins to particularize a universal indignity" (p. 255); "What is particularly disturbing about the stable sequence is that Kiarostami's camera is so overwhelmingly powerful that it is not even aware of its power, and in this oblivion, he exerts this power against the weakest, most vulnerable, and mostest subject"(p. 254).
- 24 In the end, three films by Kiarostami came to be known as the "Rostamabad trilogy": *Homework*, *And Life Goes On*, and *Through the Olive Trees*; each subsequent one after the first one alludes to the process of making the film before it.
- 25 *Sculpting in Time*, p. 109
- 26 *Sculpting in Time*, p.114-116
- 27 *Sculpting in Time*, p. 120
- 28 *Sculpting in Time*, p. 22
- 29 *Sculpting in Time*, p. 104-111
- 30 Quoted in *Sculpting in Time*, p. 29
- 31 Franklin, Anna, *Screen International*, September, 2000.
- 32 Andrew, Geoff, "Beyond the Clouds: An Interview with Nuri Bilge Ceylan," www.sensesofcinema.com, June, 2004, p. 2
- 33 Ceylan, Nuri Bilge in an interview with Geoff Andrew, *Time Out London*, May 19-26, 2004, p. 73.
- 34 Kiarostami, Abbas, interview included on DVD of *Close-Up*, 1990.
- 35 *Sculpting in Time*, p. 128.
- 36 Tarkovsky, Andrey, in *Sculpting in Time*, "Art has the capacity, through shock and catharsis, to make the human soul receptive to good" (p. 50); "Art acts above all on the soul, shaping its spiritual structure" (p. 41); "The aim of art is to prepare a person for death, to plow and harrow his soul, rendering it capable of turning to good"(pp.43).

ÔNIBUS 174 (BUS 174)

INTENTION IN THE SYSTEM OF REPRESENTATION

BY HANS W. STAATS

These are the characteristic features attributed to repression, which serve to distinguish it from the prohibitions maintained by penal law: repression operated as a sentence to disappear, but also as an injunction to silence, an affirmation of nonexistence, and, by implication, an admission that there was nothing to say about such things, nothing to see, and nothing to know¹.

Ônibus 174 (Bus 174) tells the story of a hijacked bus on 12 June 2000, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The documentary is drawn from the director José Padilha's extensive research of television and traffic surveillance footage, as well as original interviews and investigative documentation surrounding the events of Bus 174 and its perpetrator Sandro Rosa do Nascimento. *Bus 174* pronounces to tell a story in two parts, the first being the events that unfold as the police try and fail to handle the "hijacking," the second to attempt to understand the life story of the "hijacker," revealing how a typical Rio de Janeiro street kid is transformed into a violent criminal due to a society systematically denying him any kind of social existence².



Sandro on Bus 174

Bus 174 can be analyzed as a series of events relating to three questions. First, what are Sandro's intentions in relation to Bus 174; does he intend, as a premeditated course of action, to hijack the bus and murder its passengers until his terms are met? Second, how do the Brazilian police, SWAT, civilians and news media interpret Sandro's actions? Third, how is *Bus 174* as an event represented in the TV and traffic surveillance footage that Padhila edits; as well as *Bus 174* as a documentary of response or counter-representation to this stock footage?

In an effort to answer these questions, selections from Stuart Hall's *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* will be held in relation to and constellated with the writings of Michel Foucault, in particular: "The Body of the Condemned" from *Discipline and Punish*, "Method" from *The History of Sexuality, Vol. I*, "About the Concept of the 'Dangerous Individual' in Nineteenth-Century Legal Psychiatry," and "The Birth of Social Medicine."

An interpretation of *Bus 174* will also be placed within a selective discussion of the modes of documentary filmmaking: poetic, expository, participatory, observational, reflexive, and performative³. The intention of examining a hybridization of the participatory mode of documentary in *Bus 174* is to understand how the story of Sandro is told by Padhila as a restitution in cinematic terms. Further, by juxtaposing the modal and meta-theoretical interpretations of *Bus 174*, the questions of intention, interpretation and representation can be explored, formulated and reformulated in an effort to fine-tune the vicissitous nature of *Bus 174* as a media event: what are the theoretical implications, what is at stake within as well as without the spectacle of repressive power that subjects Sandro?

The documentary mode of *Bus 174* could be described as for the most part participatory. A characteristic of participatory documentary that plays an important role in *Bus 174* is the inclusion of the ethical and political in the encounter between filmmaker and subject⁴. In relating this encounter to *Bus 174*, the concept of cinematic truth regarding Sandro's intentions aboard Bus 174 becomes prevalent. Bill Nichols in *Introduction to Documentary* makes the following point regarding participatory filmmaking as cinematic truth:

This style of filmmaking is what Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin termed *cinema vérité*, translating into French Dziga Vertov's title for his newsreels of Soviet society, *kinopravda*. As "film truth," the idea emphasizes that this is the truth of an encounter rather than the absolute or untampered truth. We see how the filmmaker and subject negotiate a relationship, how they act toward one another, what forms of power and control come into play, and what levels of revelation or rapport stem from this specific form of encounter⁵.

The above quote opens a valuable space of difference between the "filmmaker" in *Bus 174* as TV news crew, automated traffic surveillance and José Padhila, specifically in the manner in which they negotiate a relationship with their subject. On the one hand it becomes obvious that the encounter with the television cameras as exploitation and specularization affects the behavior of Sandro; he performs as well as confesses to their presence. Sandro, on the other hand, is probably not aware that the traffic cameras are recording his actions and the unraveling events of *Bus 174* as well. Their presence arguably does not affect the subject, an important distinction when differentiating between observational and participatory modes of documentary. Subsequently, *Bus 174* can be said to establish itself as a film not only shifting between documentary modalities but also superimposing one modality upon the other. *Bus 174* engages the participatory and supposedly observational footage of Brazilian media and surveillance in a participatory and reflexive manner of reinterpretation in an effort to criticize as well as disclose and problematize the affair of Sandro and *Bus 174* as encounter rather than absolute and unmediated fact. The *Bus 174* affair as well as *Bus 174* as documentary are represented as a documented negotiation, including multiple and distinct participatory encounters of the filmmaker and the subject both before and after the subject's "unexplained" death.

For instance, television crews filming the live event of *Bus 174* are not properly restrained by Brazilian police and SWAT; providing for the most part unhindered access to the bus. While Sandro is threatening the hostages with a pistol and discharging multiple rounds over the course of the hijacking, TV crews are allowed to directly approach the bus and stand immediately alongside it. In addition, Sandro is more than aware of the media attention that he is receiving and addresses the hostages, police, and SWAT in a manner that reflects this awareness; his performance, one that is gladly exploited by Brazilian television, more than twenty-four hours of footage of a hijack that lasted for five hours⁶, is one of desperation as well as theatricality. An instance of the performative in Sandro's behavior is the feigned murder of Janaina in an effort to convince the police and SWAT that he is "turning up the heat." In actuality, not only is Janaina's murder a choreographed act within the bus "responded to" by multiple hostages, but it is apparent that Sandro at this point is struggling with the impossibility of his escape from *Bus 174* with his freedom or his life, regardless of, or in fact in inverse proportion to, the extremity and violence of his resistance.

The shift from Brazilian TV and surveillance to José Padhila's interpretation of Sandro is one from a system of representation to the attempted meaning of the existence of physical things and actions outside of discourse⁷. In the case of Padhila as a director of and investigative reporter for *Bus*

174, his task is not one of real time interpretation of the events surrounding Sandro and Bus 174 but the (re)assemblage and editorial (re)creation of the events preceding Bus 174; creating and inserting interview and investigative footage in order to provide an analysis of Sandro which seeks to recognize an individual as a subject produced through a chain of personal events and tragedies. Padhila chooses his interviews: the professional robber, the sociologist Luis Eduardo Soares, Sandro's maternal aunt Julieta do Nascimento, and the social worker Yvonne Bezerra, as a distinct form of social encounter⁸ in an effort to historicize *Bus 174* and broaden the narrow and repressive perspective of Sandro as a "nonexistent" and "invisible" drug-addled street kid. Padhila is looking to communicate and make visible not only the forms of power and control that influence and subject Sandro, but also reclaiming Sandro from said subjectification; a coming into play of power, knowledge, and control that is discussed by Stuart Hall's examination in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* of Michel Foucault's discursive approach to representation.

Stuart Hall describes the discursive approach to representation as a model of the constructionist approach to representation's connecting meaning and language to culture⁹. Foucault's discursive approach is organized into three categories: the concept of discourse, the issue of power and knowledge, and the question of the subject. In placing Hall in conversation with Foucault, an important point to take into account is that the discursive approach to the concept of representation is an identification and examination of the *system* of representation; a system that consists not of individual concepts but different ways of organizing and classifying concepts and of establishing complex relations between them (Hall 47). The systematized approach to representation results in the use of codes that govern the relationships of translation between shared conceptual maps and shared language systems; not only does this coding fix relationships between concepts and signs but also leaves meaning to be constructed by the system of representation rather than in the object or person or thing¹⁰. This understanding of the system of representation is essential in framing the misinterpretations and misrepresentations of Sandro's role in the *Bus 174* affair as documented by Brazilian media and countered by Padhila's *Bus 174*.

Foucault's concept of discourse is a group of statements which serve as a way of representing and producing knowledge about a particular topic at a particular historic moment, thereby governing the way that a topic can be meaningfully talked and reasoned about¹¹. In considering how this knowledge about a given topic acquires authority, Foucault states that a sense of "truth" is embodied regarding the knowledge of a given topic, a constituted "truth of the matter" at a particular historic moment that points to an institutional set of practices for dealing with those subjects whose conduct is being regulated and organized¹². This regulation and organization is carried out according to a given set of ideas, in particular that idea that physical things and actions exist, but that they only take on meaning and become objects of knowledge within discourse¹³.

Foucault describes the issue of power and knowledge as

how power operates within an institutional apparatus and its technologies or techniques; that while the apparatus is always inscribed in a play of power it is also always linked to certain co-ordinates of knowledge¹⁴. This inscription therefore links knowledge to power, assuming an authority of truth that makes itself so; all knowledge once applied in the real world has real effects and in effect becomes true¹⁵. Knowledge is then used to regulate the conduct of others, entailing constraint, regulation, and disciplining practices that, Foucault says, places the body at the center of the struggles between different formations of power and knowledge¹⁶. An example of the technologies and techniques of an institutional apparatus that regulate and constrain, repress the "visible-ness" of Sandro, from *Bus 174* would be the aesthetic of the traffic surveillance screen.

The first live footage of the *Bus 174* affair broadcast June 12th is taken from time-lapse traffic security cameras. The surveillance screen as shown in *Bus 174* includes the date, street location, time, and camera id. These visual details in *Bus 174* serve as an establishing shot; a long shot that establishes the general setting that news footage will then build upon visually with close-ups and varied interpretive camera angles. In relating the aesthetic of the traffic footage to Foucault's concept of the relationship of power and knowledge, the traffic surveillance presents itself as an "objective" observer of Sandro and *Bus 174*, eschewing commentary and reenactment. There is no talking head or "voice of god" to this footage in and of itself, that is before being edited into *Bus 174*, simply the printed facts on the screen that establish the time, date, and locale. This objectivity in effect establishes itself as a visual authority, "the facts" as self-evident and indisputable co-ordinates of knowledge¹⁷ from the real world as real effects and in effect becoming true¹⁸. The spectator of the image, whether it be a Brazilian citizen tuning in to Global Brazil June 12th, 2000 at 3:18pm or one who watches *Bus 174*, is from the outset provided with "the facts" that establish "the real" of a "hijack" in progress.

It is a point of interest that the first shots of the *Bus 174* affair do not include Sandro. Though this may not at first seem out of the ordinary, that fact that a "truthful" portrayal of Sandro is already dominated by the technologies and techniques of an institutional apparatus rather than in the object or person or thing itself¹⁹ presents a disciplining practice of knowledge that renders Sandro silent and nonexistent. Before the spectator knows who Sandro is or even what he looks like, s/he is first and foremost made aware that a crime, specifically a hijacking is taking place. While the Foucauldian "physical thing" of *Bus 174* and "actions" of Sandro occupying the bus exist, they only take on meaning and become objects of knowledge within the discourse of the "dangerous individual" involved in the criminal act of a hijacking or an "interrupted robbery." From the outset of the *Bus 174* affair, Sandro is subjected by a conceptual framework: a participant within a crime as an event that signals the existence of a dangerous element – that is, more or less dangerous – in the social body²⁰.

In considering the question of the subject, Foucault states that it is the discourse, not the subject, which provides knowledge²¹. While this discourse gives the subject a certain

reflexive awareness of his or her own conduct, the subject produces particular texts that operate within the limits of the episteme or discourse formation; the “regime of truth” of a particular period and culture as discourse that produces the subject within it²². Foucault states that the subjects seem to be produced through discourse in two distinct senses or places. First, the discourse itself produces subjects or figures who personify the particular forms of knowledge which the discourse produces²³. Second, the discourse always produces a place for the subject, for instance the reader or viewer, who is subjected to discourse; a position from which its particular knowledge and meaning most makes sense²⁴. In the case of the Bus 174 affair, the position or place of the subject as reader or viewer would at first seem to be the boulevard of the Jardim Botânico where Bus 174 is parked. This is the “physical” place of the subject *where* the Bus 174 affair is taking place.

Yet if one were to consider the place or position of the subject as the position of a particular knowledge and meaning, determined by the technologies and techniques of an institutional apparatus that operates within and links power to knowledge, the television as a medium of communication and surveillance is in fact the position of discourse that “makes most sense.” It is the TV screen that serves as the site of surveillance details such as time, date, and the location “J. Botânico.” While the number of pedestrians surrounding Bus 174 are significant, they pale in comparison to the number of television viewers in Brazil that make Bus 174 the top rated Brazilian TV event of the year²⁵.

Likewise for *Bus 174*, whose climax as a documentary is the variable speed super slow motion “recreation” of Officer Marcelo and Sandro shooting and killing the hostage Geisha, firing a total of four rounds. Padhila answers the real time incoherency of this event as filmed by Brazilian television with a captivating series of camera angles and shots, in addition to near film still slow motion in an effort to graphically depict the murderer of Geisha, Officer Marcelo, as much in the act as visually possible. Yet even in the effort to correct the misinterpretation of Sandro’s role in the death of Geisha, to make visible the relationship of knowledge and power and thereby reveal that it is the *discourse* and not the *subject* that provides knowledge, Padhila’s most useful tool in “making the most sense” is determined by the technologies and techniques of an institutional apparatus.

The combination of traffic and television footage therefore serves within a system of representation that constructs meaning; a construction that presupposes meaning in the object or person or thing²⁶. Not even *Bus 174* is outside of this system of representation. Yet a response to the role of Brazilian TV and surveillance within the system of representation informs the complexity of Padhila’s choice of editing various archival video footage as well as the addition of his own original film: interviews and expose style recreation of locale and documentation:

We worked with a five-person crew, and shot the film using two DV cameras (one DSR 500 and one PD 250) and one AATON super 16mm camera for the aerials. Research was conducted with the help of a professional detective, who also

worked for the Rio de Janeiro police, and a lawyer. They managed to collect 187 pages of legal documents and police files about Sandro’s life, and it took me a month to organize them into a map of Sandro’s life. The map led us to locate Sandro’s real family for the first time, as well as some of his former friends²⁷.

Padhila’s editorial choices also confront and are the result of certain legal as well as diegetic obstacles and risks:

The Rio de Janeiro governor had forbidden the police to talk about the issue, and everyone was afraid to talk about it on camera. During the production of the film we received a couple of strange phone calls that lead us to take security precautions such as installing electronic alarms to protect the editing room and checking our phone lines for taps. In any case, not only was the film critical of the Rio de Janeiro state police, but it also involved interviewing Sandro’s friends, and one of them happened to be a Rio de Janeiro drug dealer and cop killer. That interview took place because my assistant director decided, without consulting me, to let the drug dealer know our home addresses in case something happened to him because of the interview²⁸.

If one were to examine the intentions and logic behind Padhila’s restitution of Sandro in *Bus 174*, perhaps the following question could be asked: Is Padhila’s choice to edit the archival video footage with his own footage an effort to reclaim the identity of Sandro, in particular his life story and why he took Bus 174 hostage? The answer to this question would almost certainly be yes, indicating that both the archival footage that Padhila employs from Brazilian TV giant Global for *Bus 174* and *Bus 174* as a documentary product recounting the life story of Sandro in an effort to explain his intentions aboard Bus 174, are indicative of a system of representation that can potentially both silence and empower Sandro of his individuality.

Arguably, it is the system of representation that initiates the process of its own critique. Padhila observes the entire *Bus 174* event on live television from his gym; *Bus 174* takes place in a street next to where he lived, preventing him from returning home. Padhila states that he remained a “captive” audience, much like the city of Rio tuning-in between the hours of roughly 3:00 and 8:00pm. Everyone was glued to a TV set, wanting to find out how the hijack would end²⁹. *Bus 174* becomes, together with the Candelária Church Massacre, an event that symbolizes violence in Rio de Janeiro³⁰ and is framed by *Bus 174* within the context of urban violence in developing countries. Padhila is looking to examine, through a representation of Sandro, the broader social and governmental issues regarding Brazil’s treatment of homeless and criminal youth:

Sandro, who initially had been characterized as a crazy bandit was taken to be a symbol of the way Brazil mishandles its street kids and minor delinquents³¹.

Padhila’s understanding of Sandro is not one of specularization but of revealing what Sandro’s intentions are in relation

to Bus 174. It is apparent that Sandro did not intend to hijack but to rob Bus 174. Sandro takes the bus hostage due to the arrival and surrounding of the bus by police and SWAT. Sandro's actions then become an effort to save his life, and in a performative act of fear and desperation, disclosure of his life as a street kid of Rio de Janeiro and a survivor of the Candelária massacre. Sandro in effect makes an effort to identify and exist as more than an "invisible" and orphaned street kid through an act of violence as self-defense.

Padhila examines who Sandro is by documenting his passage through his mother's murder, The Candelária Church Massacre, Padre Severino Institute and João Luis Alves School – Juvenile Delinquent Reformatory, the prison "The Vault" of the 26th Precinct, and the Nova Holanda Slum to the Bus 174 affair in order to not only neutralize the affair as a media spectacle but to reveal or unveil the individual of *Bus 174* as a body as that is invested by power relations³² rather than somehow independent of them:

Perhaps we should abandon the belief that power makes people mad and that, by the same token, the renunciation of power is one of the conditions of knowledge. We should admit, rather, that power produces knowledge³³.

Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power. There is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case: resistances that are possible, necessary, improbable; others that are spontaneous, savage, solitary, concerted, rampant, or violent; still others that are quick to compromise, interested, or sacrificial; by definition, they can only exist in the strategic field of power relations³⁴.

Who is Sandro? Who is responsible for the outcome of the hijacking? Is the event actually a hijacking? The answers to these questions are in a sense predetermined coordinates that instead of serving to reveal the intentions and vicissitudes of Sandro as an individual instead serve to evacuate ambiguity in order to facilitate the consumption of Sandro as simply a drug addled Rio street kid: an appropriate explanation that alleviates the murder of Sandro by the Brazilian police as a response to the inadvertent yet mishandled intervention and murder of a hostage as well.

Padhila's hybridization of documentary modality is an effort to provide an honest and probing investigation of Sandro by means of intentionally asserting the primacy of the mode of representation over the object of representation³⁵. This may seem at first a contradiction in terms: Padhila puts form ahead of content in order to investigate Sandro as the subject of *Bus 174*? Might his purposes not have been better served by isolating Sandro, a single object to be represented in an observational mode, in the manner the Brazilian media had; here is the hijacker, here are a series of visual sound bites that show what the hijacker is doing, etc. Yet the result of a seemingly objective observational examination of Bus 174 on the part of Brazilian television also lacks history and context; for instance where is Sandro from and why is he hijacking the bus in the first place? Padhila's choice to represent Sandro from an historicized and polysemic use of documentary modes by putting into play the predetermined coordinates and revealing the evacuation of ambiguity "play-by-play," presents the indecidability of

Sandro's intentions as determined and constructed by the system of representation.

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NOTES

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- 2 "Synopsis," Bus 174 Official Website, 2002, <<http://www.bus174.com>>.
- 3 Table 1: General Sketch of the Six Modes of Documentary Representation.
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CENTENARY



Otto Preminger (1905–1986)

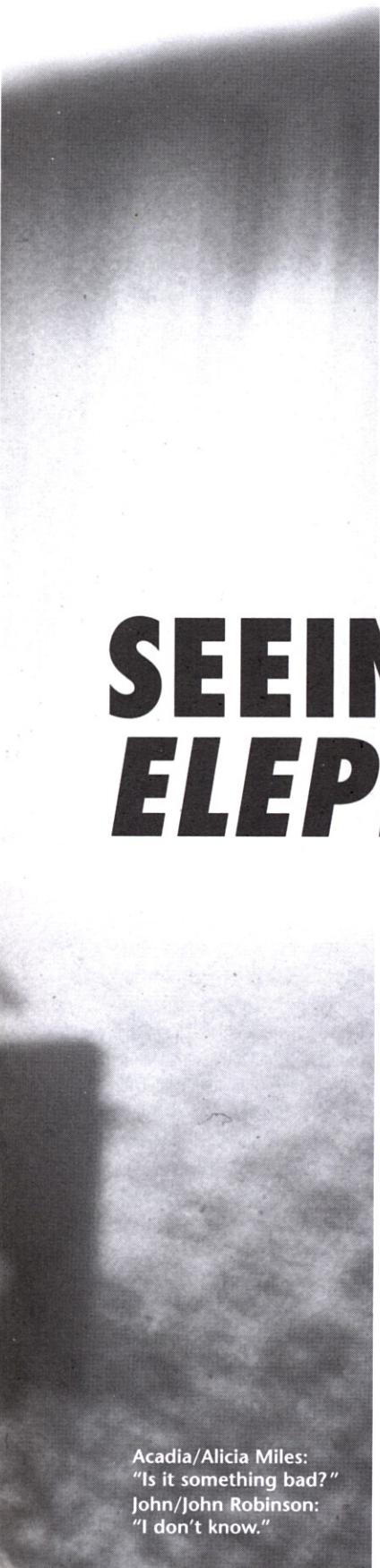
with Charles Laughton on the set of *Advise and Consent* (1962),
one of Preminger's finest films.

Greta Garbo (1905–1990)

Star and icon extraordinaire.







Viewing *Elephant* (Gus Van Sant, 2003) once is to enter into a beautiful mystery. Unraveling it begins with the title, an allusion to Alan Clarke's 1989 BBC film *Elephant*, itself named after writer Bernard MacLaverty's statement about problems in Northern Ireland resembling an elephant in your living room that is impossible to avoid but is begrudgingly tolerated. The non-narrative and episodic structure of Clarke's documentary style film, as well as the use of handheld camera and the absence of dialogue, provides further inspiration for *Elephant*. But another allusion is to an Indian fable recounted by John Godfrey Saxe in his poem "The Blind Men and the Elephant": each blind man describes the animal in a different way according to the part of it he feels. But the conviction of their partly correct perception is overshadowed by their ignorance in not understanding their varied perspectives that make up the entire creature. The misunderstandings of these learned blind men serve as a lesson in achieving a balanced and more complex perception. These references move *Elephant* toward the maturity of its own vision.

SEEING ELEPHANT

BY DION TUBRETT

With inspiration from a politically aware yet distanced view to the sly wisdom of a fable, *Elephant* approaches its dark subject matter in the most poetic of ways. Using a nonprofessional cast and working with improvisation the film follows one day in an American high school that ends in violence, drawing on the tragic events at Columbine High School in 1999. A wandering camera captures events in the school, sometimes repeatedly, while following a number of its students. The long take, the preoccupation with the details of everyday life, the classical music score, and the large absence of "reaction shots" in the creation of an offscreen world are just some elements that the film adopts which heighten its poetic resonance. This is juxtaposed with the mundane realities of teenage life. The film's heightened use of long takes contributes to realism in the film's passage of time yet it also uses slow motion and repeats events from different perspectives, even privileging certain characters with flashbacks. The overall effect of this approach builds on the mysterious beauty of the everyday counterbalanced by the horrors of inexplicable violence; and while the film shows many possible reasons for the violent climax, it offers no explanation of or answers to the dilemma it addresses. It remains a subdued mystery.

In an effort to see *Elephant*, the most balanced understanding may be achieved in

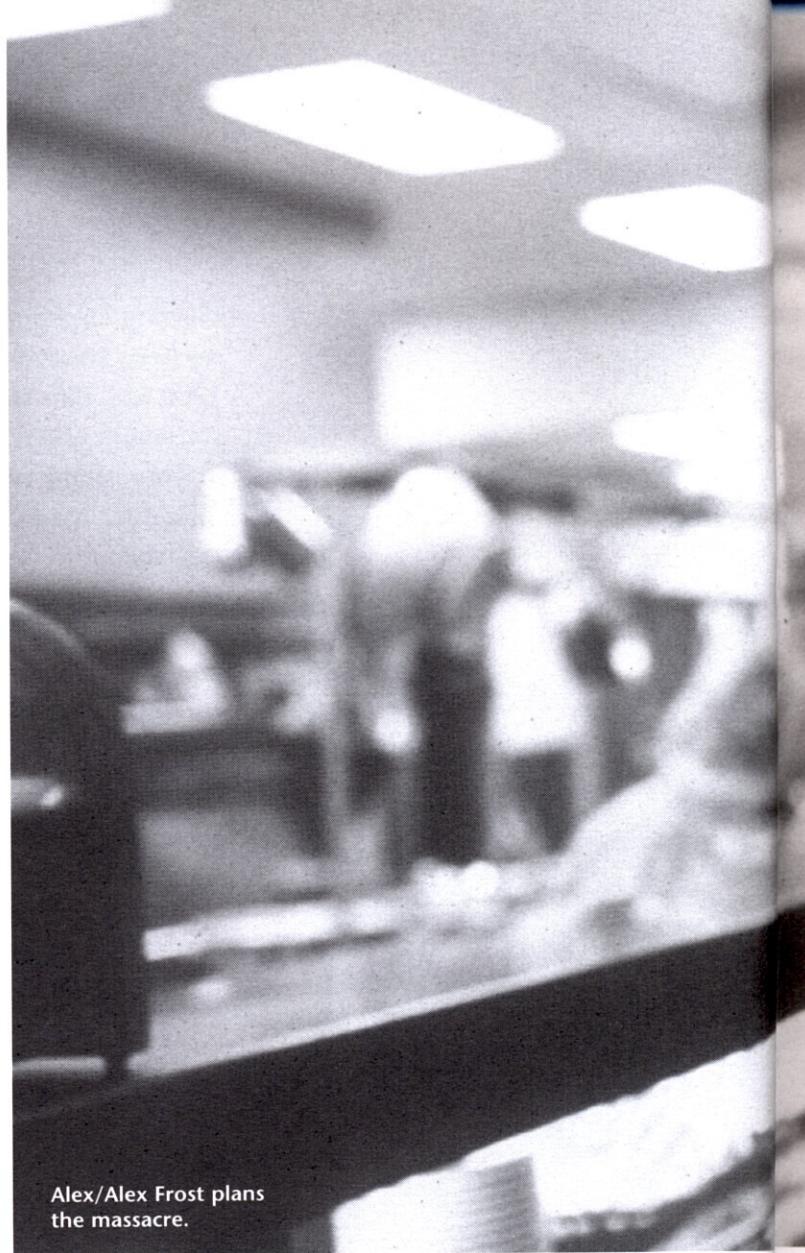
Acadia/Alicia Miles:
"Is it something bad?"
John/John Robinson:
"I don't know."

attempting what the fabled blind men once tried: to define it by feeling out its presence. But recognizing the failure of those fabled blind men and attempting to accept the diversity of perspectives needed to see the elephant in its complexity, without discovering truths or answers, may be the only way we can ever see—the film, the world, and the limits of our understanding. Mirroring the six blind men in Saxe's poem, different approaches and aspects of the film will be investigated in six different sections: "Reality Television," Style and Tone, Structure, John & Alex, Dream, and Meaning and Responsibility... and the Mask of Indifference. Each avenue to explore the film offers distinct advantages to understanding the film's various aspects.

But what is the overall result of these varied perspectives? One of the strengths of the film lies in its ability to engage in a multiplicity of meanings of, and causes for, the tragic events yet never allowing any set of agents the power to dictate a definitive meaning. Do video games contribute toward teen violence? Yes. But they alone are not responsible. One conclusion gained from seeing *Elephant*, for there are many, is in the tragedy of not hearing the voices of the silent. In the film, this appears in the voices of youth with the many individual and private conflicts each student faces. These private dilemmas, from family to self-image problems, are given a horrifically public voice in the massacre orchestrated by two students. Their violence gives a voice to their disenfranchisement, previously unheard by their peers, school, and parents. This type of oppression gleaned through the multiple perspectives, even if only internalized, finds a correlative in the tragic silences of those oppressed socially and politically. Perhaps, the effect of witnessing the collage of interrelated high school students' stories is not toward the result of understanding exactly why such an event takes place. Instead, such a cinematic experience can show the importance of being present and attentive to society's youth, specifically, while also the power of increased socio-cultural awareness, more generally. The increasing of perspective offers a more thorough understanding. However, part of that understanding lies in the ambiguity of ever truly knowing anything. What takes precedence over an attempt to know an event, like the reasons behind a high school massacre, is an appreciation of the moment: cherishing those moments, beautiful or innocuous, that comprise life. The film engages in a distanced almost documentary-style observation while frequently privileging seemingly random moments, through repetition or slow motion techniques. This erects a division between searching for the causes of teen violence and witnessing the experience of the life of those affected by the tragedy. The moments that perpetually create the present are elevated and emphasized by *Elephant*'s approach to its subject. It is in this narrowing of its focus on these moments that the film retains an elusive poetic beauty surpassing the sum of its parts.

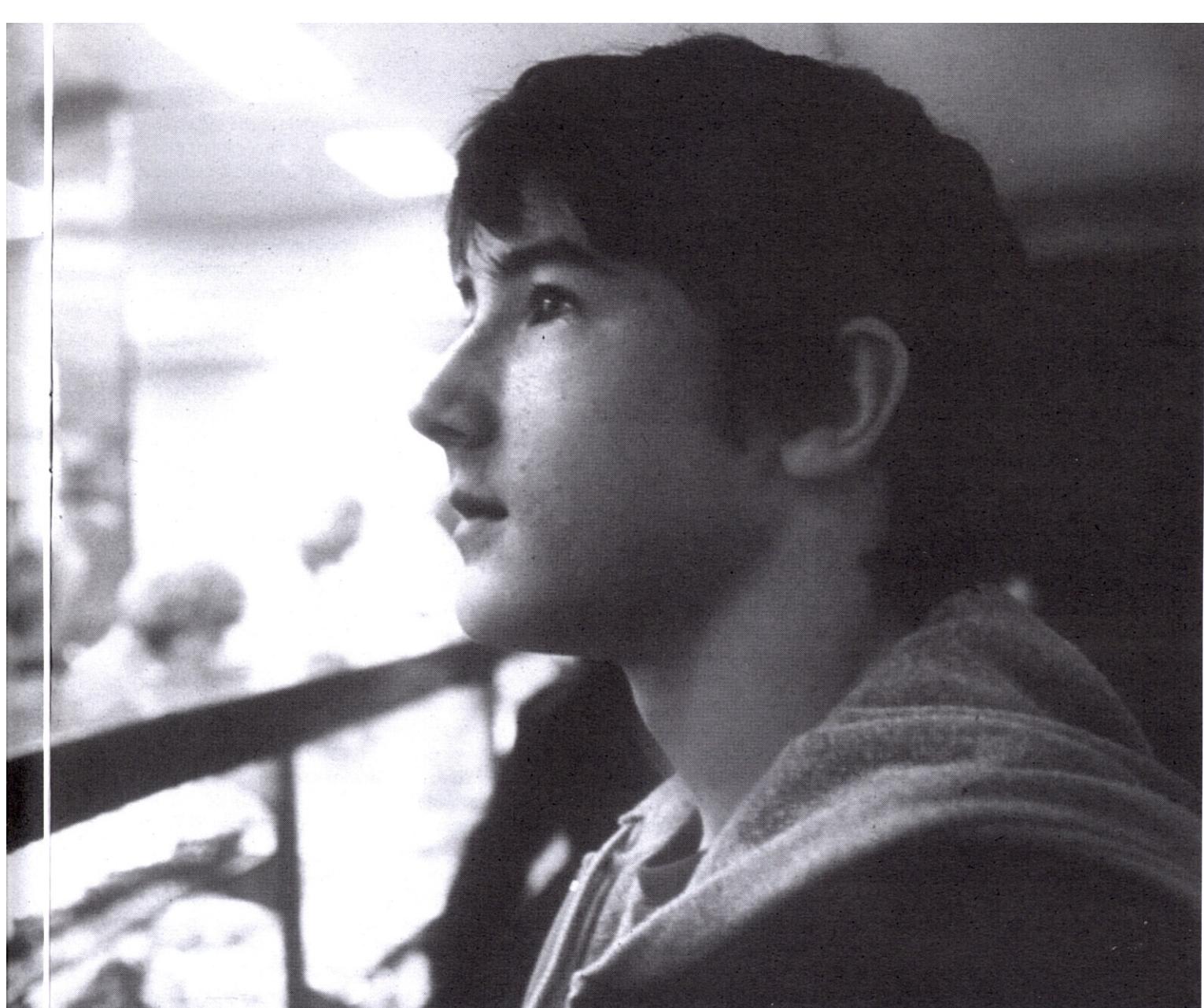
"REALITY TELEVISION"

Of the various ways to approach *Elephant*, seeing its relation to "reality television" is perhaps most eccentric. Several factors prompted the present discussion. Specifically, the film's aspect ratio and largely adopted documentary-style realism



Alex/Alex Frost plans the massacre.

lead to a consideration of other cultural products with similar attributes. Also, potentially locating formal and thematic influences on *Elephant*, even if they appear somewhat removed in the finished film, provides a way into understanding its peculiar narrative approach. Finally, in a film that concerns itself with the experience, and destruction, of youth—and by extension our culture—it seems appropriate to look to contemporary media culture trends to see if a relationship exists. Exploding into popular culture only within the last five years, "reality television" has come to adopt documentary techniques toward the creation of programming that largely aspires to the dictates of a fictional drama. But beyond the structuring of documentary footage within a predetermined narrative structure, one requiring defined character types and conflict, the particular approach and relation to characters that "reality television" embraces finds a correlative in the film. The relationship to characters, one locked within voyeurism and sadism—a need to see, to witness, to accuse, to punish, that is intrinsic to "reality television" finds a parallel complexity in the film. The viewer is repeatedly offered a privileged vision through instances of intimacy



within the public sphere: "reality television" presents private tensions and dilemmas of its characters, such as in producer Mark Burnett's *Survivor* or *The Apprentice*, while the film slows time to reveal these personal moments. For all these reasons, a look at "reality television" offers one way to see *Elephant*.

However, often the moments of crisis that comprise the privileged moments of intimacy in "reality television" are held up to scrutiny: not by the narrative but by the viewer. The moments of crisis that structure "reality television" maintain a pattern of establishing the scenario, witnessing the crisis in which the viewer is usually made complicit through editing and foreknowledge, and then focusing on the heightened emotional reaction of the participant which is inevitably negative. While this pattern does follow the standard narrative structure of exposition, rising action, climax and denouement, there is a fundamental difference in the ethics of "reality television": these television programs do not foster sympathy or empathy. Instead of an emotional connection there is distance. A program that structures itself around rating individuals, for instance, revolves around the power of witnessing personal joys and hardships yet with emotional

distance: without investment in these onscreen "characters" the viewer can enjoy the vicarious pleasure of judging and watching them suffer. Sadism and voyeurism are indeed united and enforced. It is by the inherent distance through the mediation of television that the viewer is encouraged to thrive on those baser instincts that relish in onscreen individuals' discomfort. This is aided by the structuring narrative and the formal devices of this brand of entertainment, the formal iconography of this style.

The formal qualities of "reality television" can be seen in many ways to inform *Elephant*'s structure and style. Certain common elements of "reality television" are of interest here: the emphasis on shot/ countershot; invisible editing; the necessity of "character" backstories; use of handheld camera. The characteristics contribute to a heightening of emotional crises that are ever present: witnessing reactions and confrontations with the instability and intimacy of handheld camera work. These are all techniques to highlight the emotional tumult displayed for the viewer.

HBO Films, a division of the U.S. cable network HBO [Home Box Office Entertainment], is the chief producer and

distributor of the film. HBO Films largely funds film projects to air on their network as “telefilms.” While *Elephant* is part of the company’s growth in theatrically distributed films the film’s very shape draws attention to itself and its connection to television. The aspect ratio for the film is 1.37:1, nearly identical to the standard television aspect ratio of 4:3. This literally frames the events in the visual parameters associated with television. Improvisation with nonprofessional actors lends the film a degree of authenticity, a documentary reality, paralleling the construction of “reality television.” Of the twelve student actors, ten use their names for their characters. The only exceptions are Acadia/Alicia Miles and Michelle/ Kristen Hicks. In many ways the film is crafted with a documentary sensibility where the fiction comes from the narrative structure rather than the individual actors who are largely playing themselves. The way in which nonprofessional actors are thrust into a dramatic scenario finds a connection with “reality television” where contestants become players in a human drama captured, edited, and essentially created for the television audience. These elements help to confuse the line between fiction and reality. The handheld camera further provides the film with a sense of intimacy and immediacy. The camera is able to follow characters closely wherever they move in their environment. This aesthetic, due to the spontaneity of action, is also used frequently in “reality television.”

However, several characteristics of “reality television” are manipulated within *Elephant*’s structure. With the classical Hollywood structure creating a narrative logic based upon specific rules of editing and narrative, any defiance of these rules is immediately noticeable. So if “reality television” is based upon a voyeuristic and sadistic need to witness the emotional reactions of participants, then withholding the “reaction shot” creates suspense and dissatisfaction. Refusing immediate reaction shots extends the cinematic world beyond the bounds of the frame, through viewer inference, thereby providing it with authenticity while thwarting viewer expectation. *Elephant* does not entirely dismiss the “reaction shot” but selectively uses it. These shots punctuate the film’s structure of fluidly moving long takes: nearly every exchange is maintained in this style. When it is withheld, for instance when Eric/Eric Deulen is shot, it signals disturbance. Through the film’s exacting distance in its usage of long takes and the emotional barrier it erects in its fluid presentation of everyday life, it offers room only to observe. This distance is part of the film’s structure effectively barring viewer empathy. The slow methodical pace, built around repetition and a fatalistic understanding of the teenage destruction, evokes sadism through witnessing the students’ grief, the inevitable action, and the disinterested presentation of the murders. The film demands its violent third act by its very own narrative structure. Ironically the presentation of death in many ways opposes this sadistic impulse by not focusing on the murders: death frequently occurs, presumably even to central characters, offscreen. By not indulging the appetite of the viewer by showing everything, it simultaneously enforces and opposes these two forces of voyeurism and sadism as experienced in “reality television.” But here voyeurism is not appeased and sadism is reflected back on to the viewer.

Another way *Elephant* toys with the conventions of “reality television” is by manipulating character development and motivation. But, while “reality television” requires explicit “character” backstories transplanted into a predetermined narrative arc, *Elephant* is more elusive. We are given only minimal background information about the students. They exist primarily as “types.” The objectivity of the film connects with an element of “reality television” involving the documentary practice of witnessing an event. This is aided by the use of the long take in enforcing the authenticity of reality and taking a stance toward the event, giving the illusion of impartiality and freedom. In these instances the camera movement is not dictated by the needs of character or narrative but instead replicates a certain grace in directly observing the action. This is opposed to the “reality television” practice which uses quick, invisible editing to convey feeling and anchor the viewer.

It seems necessary in discussing *Elephant*’s documentary influences to briefly mention *Bowling for Columbine* (Michael Moore, 2002). While it can be seen how *Elephant* cleverly operates within certain documentary or “reality television” modes, it is ultimately not a documentary. It can be set against Moore’s film in the ways they deal with the Columbine High School massacre. Moore’s passionate rendering of events, collected through interviews and even security camera footage of the attack from within the school, is compelling but oppressively manipulative through his overarching structure and explicit agenda. In contrast, Van Sant’s film elliptically unfolds a fictionalized telling of events at a high school massacre and through its poetic and distanced, in a way “objective,” perspective offers insight and complexity where Moore offers tentative answers. Because of the distinct ways they construct and manipulate structure and tone it feels as if the films surpass their generic boundaries. *Elephant*, at times, has the verisimilitude of a Cinéma vérité documentary while *Bowling For Columbine* has the blatant directorial construction and manipulation of a fiction film. Regardless of their distinct directions their vast popular and critical acceptance is a good signal of general awareness of, and attention to, the issues the films raise.

STYLE AND TONE

Elephant’s distinctive style, particularly its reliance on long takes, is immediately apparent in an initial viewing. A look at the film’s shot breakdown can show the intensity to which this is a unifying feature. The film contains one hundred shots, including title cards and opening and closing credit shots. Of these one hundred shots: thirty shots are over one minute long, fourteen of those are over two minutes, and two of those are over three minutes [the final closing credit shot fades to black at two minutes and fifty-seven seconds while the closing credits finish thirty-eight seconds later—I have chosen to class this as a shot running “over two minutes”]. With a running time of eighty-one minutes and twenty-one seconds this puts the average shot length (ASL) at nearly forty-nine seconds. With a popular trend toward faster editing styles and a shorter ASL, this characteristic of *Elephant* is unusual but not interesting on its own. What is of interest is

the degree to which the long take becomes connected to specific characters and how it comes to characterize a tangible mood in the film. One clear example of this occurs early in the film on the school's football field: a shot introduces Nathan/Nathan Tyson and Michelle, before they are formally introduced by name or title card, in the first of the two longest shots in the film. The shot opens on the field with a group exercising in the background. It focuses on the empty foreground which is slowly filled by the male students of the football game, including Nathan and Benny/Bennie Dixon. As they play, the noises of the game compete with the rising score: Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*. In the background female students are vaguely seen running along the perimeter of the field. While the women begin to cross the foreground of the shot, the focus shifts from the football game to them. One of them, Michelle, stops to look into the sky. This moment is specially privileged: she stops to ponder the sky (does she sense the shift in the atmosphere that is about to come? The sky is metaphorically charged in the film), the score overpowers the soundtrack, and the sparse onscreen action is slowed. She then runs offscreen leaving the foreground of the frame empty as the football game has also moved offscreen. Shortly thereafter one of the football players, Nathan, leaves. He walks to the centre of the frame, pauses for a moment, and walks away from the game toward the school.

Until this point the film has focused on characters that it identifies immediately through introductory title cards. With this shot, however, the film seems to connect arbitrarily with characters as they pass its gaze: Michelle and Nathan, both yet to be named by the film. This connection is tied to the formal structure of the shot. This shot also beautifully illustrates the way the film formally suggests an offscreen world at the same time as it literally foregrounds absence. It is the sense of absence that remains a continual presence through this narrative construction. Within this particular shot, Beethoven's melody resonates a certain reverence, love, and awe coupled with loss. This sense of loss, as well as Beethoven, becomes associated with Alex/Alex Frost. The authenticity created by the long take is complicated by slow motion highlighting an individual moment. The film repeatedly slows down time, disrupting the realism of the long take, to cherish such nondescript moments. This seems to be one key into understanding the interconnectedness of the parts of the film that create the whole.

Yet this shot continues. Up until Nathan leaves the game the camera has been stationary, even with evidence that it is handheld. But once Nathan begins to walk away the camera at once follows him in a manner that is repeated several times throughout the film: lingering behind the character. The connection of camera to character is rather mysterious. This shot ends following Nathan to the school but stops and lets him walk into the background as he approaches it. This instantly creates a tangible sense of distance from the character while it remains tied to him. More frequently, as happens in the next shot, the camera very briefly moves from character to character gaining a life of its own through movement. This next shot decreases the physical distance from its subject, Nathan, yet it frees itself even more from its direct connec-

tion with him. As he walks through the school, crossing from interior to exterior location without editing, the camera rotates around him and finds other characters. The freedom the camera experiences, not to mention the technical virtuosity of such a feat, at once opens up the film world while also showing it as fundamentally empty. The suggestion of off-screen space, the foregrounding of absence, and the sense of brooding emptiness are elements that show the interrelation of form and content. Here the visual style of the film points to the creation of a specific mood.

Interrelated with the visual style is the film's tone. The sense of emptiness and loss is gained from the film's formal qualities. Yet a certain puzzled disillusionment is apparent from these same formal and narrative qualities. The result is a kind of apathy, formally connected in the very haphazard nature of the wandering camera that seems to not care which direction it moves in. Similarly, due to the film's elliptical structure and the half-veiled backstories of the characters, a sense of the mysterious, even transcendental or spiritual, arises. The middle of the film provides a good example of these connected feelings.

The longest shot of the film occurs exactly at the film's midpoint. The shot follows Brittany/Brittany Mountain, Jordan/Jordan Taylor, and Nicole/Nicole George as they eat lunch and complain about the complications of teenage life. But while they are getting food in the cafeteria the camera leaves them, and their constant chatter, to follow members of the kitchen staff as they sneak away to smoke pot in a store-room. In the same fluid movement the camera follows another kitchen staff member as he leaves the backrooms to return to the main cafeteria, with the camera then rejoining the three chattering women. After following them to their table the camera floats away again, spotting John/John Robinson leaving the school: an action the camera has already visited while aligned with John when first introducing the two teenage gunmen. The camera moves slowly back to their very brief lunch and follows them as they leave. But even then the camera briefly lingers on other students in the cafeteria, settling momentarily on a disagreement between friends over singing, before returning to the exiting women. The way in which the camera glides to and from the characters in this single shot provides a basis for its ethic of apathy. It shows some interest in the characters in following their individual lives and troubles but not enough to investigate the depth of their situations. Its attempt to encompass a totality of experience through various perspectives leaves a similar emptiness at its heart. Yet this emptiness is not all consuming. It comes from viewing the events in a single way that privileges an overall sense of meaningful connection with the characters rather than embracing the series of moments the film offers. In this way the film does both: the emptiness is set against these single beautiful moments—a kiss; briefly meeting a friend; stopping to experience the world around you. But as the film builds on the darkness that communicates this emptiness, such as the murderous plan and its inevitable execution, it can eclipse those fleeting and private moments scattered throughout. This doesn't diminish the power of those brief moments but instead shows them as a lens to view the beauty of life—however mundane it may appear.



Gus Van Sant (right) directs
Alex Frost (left)

The sense of emptiness, at times overrun by a feeling of loss, is best showcased in a sequence immediately following the film's midpoint. Alex plays Beethoven's *Fur Elise* in his basement bedroom. The camera surveys his room as he plays. The scene is carried by the sheer emotional weight of the musical piece which at once signals the multiple reactions of beauty, pain, and loss. These notes, refracted through Alex, seem to intensify their effect. He then begins Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*, repeating the score of the earlier scene on the football field. This centralizes the sense of loss in one character: the character creates this beautiful melody, alone and underground. His focus on his music, ending in frustration, moves to preparation with Eric on the laptop computer. His determination in the creation of beautiful art, which is thwarted, is transferred onto the creation of destruction, which is encouraged by his friend. The metaphoric and symbolic overtones, with his preparations hidden underground and the ensuing dark storm, are not subtle. Alex's subdued grief, and the pain it hides, marks its presence over the entire film.

The film's final moments also mark this emptiness when Alex at last finds Nathan and Carrie/Carrie Finklea hiding in the cafeteria's meat locker. With his gun trained on them they are heard pleading, but out of the camera's view. Alex slowly smirks and begins reciting a nursery rhyme, "Eeny meeny miny moe," to decide whom he will kill first. The arbitrary ruthlessness of his act, in the guise of a child's game, points to a lack of meaning at the core of the teenage destruction.

STRUCTURE

The way the film introduces and follows several students allows for its episodic structure. The events in these characters' lives intersect, revealing a multiplicity of perspectives by repeating several sequences from different points of view. The intersection of meaning, and creation of new meanings, ideally exists to gain a more complete view of an event by seeing it from multiple angles. Yet one of the film's key virtues

is that this strategy does the exact opposite: instead of providing a wider context to situate and explain the characters and events the same incompleteness is present. Even with the repetition of certain moments from different perspectives, as well as flashbacks with Alex, the film follows a roughly linear progression. The film's repetitive nature embraces a cyclical nature of time: moments are repeated that provide further context. This helps in showing the complexity of even the most random incident as well as the beauty each fleeting moment holds. Repetition is used toward building a suspenseful climax while also fostering feelings of helplessness and hopelessness through the fatalistic violent destiny the film creates.

The film has several moments which recur from as many as three different perspectives, each time revealing new information and the complexity in even the most chance encounter or mundane experience. One such encounter concerns Elias/Elias McConnell, John, and Michelle. Through revisiting the same event three times, each time connected with a different student's perspective, we finally learn that as Elias wanders the halls with his camera, John is also wandering after upsetting encounters with his drunken father and an insensitive principal, while Michelle runs to work at the school library. By reorienting the same encounter through three different students, the film unveils a formal approach cherishing complexity and plurality as intrinsic to deeper understanding. Coupled with this, however, is the innate mystery of nondisclosure by withholding all but the most empirical and elliptical details of their lives. The film is formally divided among the various students, announced by title cards with their name. Through the individual narrowing of focus on a student or group of students it lets the specificity of each group slowly blossom into a larger understanding. The beauty of the sum of the individual parts is that it reveals as much as it withholds. The film's structure creates parallel and cyclical storylines yet it does not produce a definitive interpretation for the viewer; the meaning of events is still hesitantly laid. If anything, an increased awareness high-

lights our very limits of knowledge: we may not know why the high school massacre occurred. Perhaps we may only witness those privileged and fleeting moments, often signaled by slow motion or repetition. In those moments the signals and symptoms of the deterioration of a culture's youth may lie. Those moments also hold the beauty of life.

JOHN & ALEX

Various characters occupy the film's focus: John, the "care-free," yet tormented, rebel; Elias, the personable photographer; Nathan and Carrie, the loving couple; Acadia, the compassionate spirit; Eric and Alex, the outcasts, best friends, lovers, and murderers; Michelle, self-conscious and responsible; Brittany, Jordan and Nicole, the chattering bulimic friends; Benny, the heroic-minded student. Of these characters, John and Alex are especially privileged by the film. John opens the film and Alex ends it. In many ways they mirror each other and their perspectives are adopted by the film. It is significant that John is the only student Alex spares by warning him.

Out of the serenity of the film's opening images the camera follows a careening car down a residential street, hitting cars along its path. When the title card "John" is flashed on the screen the natural association is that John is drunkenly driving the car. But we instantly learn that John is a victim of this out of control scenario owing to his father's alcoholism. John has to take control and "parent" his father. John is punished for his responsibility by the principal once arriving at school. The film seems to infer that all authority, parental and institutional, is absent or misguided and even independent responsibility and initiative is either a) misunderstood, as with John, or b) misguided, as with Alex's destructive plan. But John's strength cannot mask his pain as he breaks down the first moment he is alone in the school. Acadia senses his sadness and asks him why he is crying. She asks, "Is it something bad?" to which he replies "I don't know." Whether John can define this feeling and give voice to it, whether this feeling of despair and distress is pervasive to his experience or the experience of all youth, his unspecified anguish serves as an omen for the violence that is to come. But his visible grief does not result in violence. The objectivity of the shooting style is matched by the subjectivity of emotion and the intangible tone. With his personal troubles as a red herring of sorts, the "reasons" for violence are continually offered but never held firm.

Alex is given more privileged moments than anyone else in the film. He is given elaborate flashback sequences outlining his bullying by other students, including Nathan, and his preparations with Eric to assault the school. Of particular importance here is the way the form of the film adopts Alex's enthusiasm, specifically in his review of the assault with Eric: in a film that has characteristically long takes this sequence includes eighteen shots in one minute and thirty-one seconds whereas it took the film over sixteen minutes to reach its first eighteen shots. This drastic change in editing further aligns the film with Alex's consciousness. This is another example of how the film plays with subjectivity and objectivity in its formal design. But the film ultimately

comes to embrace Alex as its centre and it is therefore not surprising that it should reflect his character, including his distance and occasional enthusiasm.

Alex is presented as very quiet and intelligent. He is refined and even teaches Eric, for instance when they watch a documentary about Nazi Germany on television. Alex's relation to Eric shifts through the film from peer to parent to lover. The film plays with challenging the accepted codes of homosexuality in the sequence concerning Acadia's round-table meeting of the Gay-Straight Alliance.¹ Alex's relationship to Eric dramatically shifts one final time during their assault. Alex storms the hallways shooting everyone that he sees. While reloading in the desolate school, he mutters a line from Macbeth: "So foul and fair a day I have not seen." The reference, both showcasing his intelligence and sadistic delight, highlights the great loss of potential through his own misdirection. Alex finds himself alone and is greatly disturbed at having no one left to kill. Briefly spying Nathan and Carrie, he moves to the cafeteria and sits at a table having a quiet drink among his spoils of his destructive plan. Eric arrives and casually asks about Alex's progress. While Eric reports on his own progress he is shot dead by his friend, partner and lover Alex. Alex then continues his hunt for remaining students. The murder of Eric is made more jarring by the use of a long take and camera framing visually removing Alex from the act. The quick presentation of the murder, so brief as to be inconsequential, emphasizes the disinterested view of violence in the film. The lack of clear motivation for Alex continues the film's ambiguous treatment of meaning so various explanations may apply: perhaps it was due to Alex's hatred over his own homosexuality, killing Eric to kill himself; perhaps Alex felt superior to his disposable 'student' Eric, especially since the massacre had nearly ended; perhaps Alex knew that the killing would not end until both he and Eric were dead, and he chose who would die last; perhaps his destructive drive toward complete annihilation would not leave Eric exempt. Eric's murder succinctly captures Alex's cold and calculating nature while also showing how this destructive drive, much like the film's presentation of events, is beyond mercy.

DREAM

Since the film is so closely tied to Alex it remains to try and understand one to know the other. The film offers many viable reasons for the violence that erupts. Whether it be bullying, disillusionment, apathy, lack of understanding parental or institutional authority, violent video games, a fascination with fascism, or closeted homosexuality, it resists the temptation to rest much solace in any "reason." Even more than the ways it suggests to understand the climax there is an overlying intangible quality that structures its logic and momentum. *Elephant* moves as a dream.

The film operates as Alex's dream. The film is neatly structured in halves punctuated by shots of the sky. The sky in the opening shot slowly darkens with the voices of playing children in the background. Later, as Alex and Eric plan their attack, there is a cut to storm clouds gathering in the night. As the thunder swells a cut returns to the sleeping figures of Alex and Eric. Finally, the closing shot centres on a darkly

clouded sky now brightening with the coming sunrise. Over this image the *Moonlight Sonata* is faintly heard. These three images provide a metaphoric framework for the film. They provide a slow darkening and a tumultuous climax followed by a rebirth. But these images have even more meaning if linked directly to Alex. Similarly, classical music, which serves as the film's score, is shown in one sequence as performed by him. His association with classical music, then, in a way extends his presence throughout the film where it appears, even when he is physically absent. The film, in effect, can be viewed as Alex's dream. As it grows darker and builds to its peak the very air is filled with a brooding tension. Once it explodes, death is the only release. The final image of the clearing sky signals a rebirth and also a freedom; Alex is freed from the torments of life. The sense of loss that the classical music score signifies envelopes the entire atmosphere and acts very much like Alex's voice.

The dreamlike quality of the film is aided by the uncertainty within its style. In addition to the large absence of "reaction shots," certain key elements are withheld from view. As the film floats from one character to another its focus is never complete. Part of the beauty of the film is that in an effort to expand the understanding of the totality of an event, a moment in time, it necessarily has to omit other elements. Elias, and his presumable death, is never returned to after he snaps a photo of Alex just before Michelle is shot. The film does not privilege death at all. It is presented as mundanely as any other event. Death and violence are not focal points in the film. It is rather the potential quality of life that is valued. The film does not allow for any real resolution in showing an end to Alex's plan. The only character given real closure is John in reuniting with his father. The film is a patchwork of time and emotion that is sewn together through the distanced mind of teenage despondency.

MEANING AND RESPONSIBILITY... AND THE MASK OF INDIFFERENCE

Seeing *Elephant*'s relation to "reality television" and analyzing the function of its formal structure leads to a consideration of its meaning. Can the film's emotional distance and ambiguous nature be equated with apathy, as has been hinted at here? Initially the formal indifference of the camera, in freely moving amongst characters, and the elliptical storytelling structure, without the safety of outlining reasons for events, creates a degree of narrative dissonance: it does not provide meaning nor does it cast judgment on characters. Its "observational" style presents numerous causes behind the high school massacre but none is given the film's full support. The blatantly foreshadowed climax suspends an aura of dread and inevitability over the entire film. The events are almost fatalistic in the way each of these destructive forces weighs on the characters individually, John and Michelle suffer torments as does Alex, so that the massacre symbolizes the torments that many of the high school students privately face.

Elephant does not single out a cause for the destruction that erupts. Instead of relying on a cultural cliché it bombards the viewer with so many factors that the end result is inevitable, much like its violence: society is responsible yet it

takes no responsibility. Society creates monsters yet discards them. The insulating bonds of family, peers and education have dissolved or mutated into a *Rough Beast, its hour come round at last*. By taking the shape of a contemporary medium of voyeurism and sadism, "reality television," in presenting the spectacle of youth's disintegration, the film focuses its blame everywhere and nowhere: it constructs its gaze according to the rhetoric of this destructive spectacle while showing that every facet of society, from parenting to video games to education, is in its way irresponsible in not seeing the consequences they individually produce.

The only solace *Elephant* offers, seemingly bombarded by the violent spectacle, is found in treasuring the transitory moments that make up life. Many sequences in the film are comprised of a numbing repetition of everyday events. While this can, and does, act to distance the viewer it equally imbues the moment—and the experience of the moment—with a poetic beauty surpassing the boundaries of the narrative medium. What remains in those ephemeral glimpses is something that exceeds words... and meaning. In those moments lies hope.

CONCLUSION

There is no sufficient conclusion to be made beyond those observations already addressed: *Elephant*'s manipulation of narrative modes, from playing with time to character development and motivation, reveals a mystery and maturity beyond the sum of its parts. The success of the film is to be made in part through its incomprehensibility: its elliptical distance reveals its strength. Individually the validity of any of these ways of seeing *Elephant* will be incomplete. But taken collectively, the film makes a poignant statement on the mystery of this recent surge of teenage destruction and its unfortunate inevitability within our contemporary society: violence has become the voice of a silent nation. The signal of the decline of Western civilization is in the self-destruction of its youth. It is plain to see. All you have to do is open your eyes.

This essay is lovingly dedicated to Lindsay Shostal who everyday teaches me to see. For continued love and inspiration: this is for you.

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NOTES

- 1 According to the codes the students discuss at the meeting, certain characters in the film can be read as embodying "homosexual" traits. But even at their meeting they ultimately decide that external characteristics are not sufficient to label someone as homosexual. The challenge to expectations and assumptions is embraced by the film. By initially showing John's family problems and his breakdown at school he appears to be a suitable candidate for committing the violent acts. In this way he acts as a red herring. Equally a challenge to expectations, extending the classroom debate over determining sexual orientation, the film nonchalantly includes a moment of sexual intimacy between Alex and Eric before they execute their attack despite offering no prior suggestion.

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